

MATTHEW 5:27–32. (EHV)

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’ [Exod. 20:14], but I tell you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to fall into sin, pluck it out and throw it away from you. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. If your right hand causes you to fall into sin, cut it off and throw it away from you. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce’ [Deut. 24:1]. But I tell you that whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, causes her to be regarded as an adulteress. And whoever marries the divorced woman is regarded as an adulterer.”

The pandemic is over—thank God—but the epidemic remains.

Let me share some statistics with you. As I do so, so that I don’t have to keep saying the uncomfortable word *pornography* over and over again, I’m going to substitute the phrase “explicit immorality” for the word *pornography*. These statistics are from 2018, so if anything, I’m guessing they’ve gotten worse in the last four to five years. I’m also guessing that these stats are limited to the United States.

\$3,075.64 is spent on explicit immorality every second on the internet.

One in five mobile searches are for explicit immorality.

The majority of teens and young adults 13–24 believe not recycling is worse than viewing explicit immorality.

Of those who call themselves Christians, 64% of men and 15% of women say they watch explicit immorality at least once a month.

51% of male students and 32% of female students first viewed explicit immorality before their teenage years.

68% of divorce cases involved one party meeting a new lover over the internet.

56% involved one party having an obsessive interest in websites featuring explicit immorality.

These are just a small sample. We could sit here for a long time and get really depressed over stats related to the explicit immorality epidemic in our country. And they would not just be depressing because of what they tell us about what’s going on out there. They would also be depressing because those stats also involve many of us in some way, shape, or form.

Now more than ever, we need Jesus to teach us the Sixth Commandment, “You shall not commit adultery.”¹

¹ Note to any Protestant readers who learned “You shall not commit adultery” as the Seventh Commandment: Jews, Lutherans/Catholics, and Protestants all number the Ten Commandments differently due to several factors. While there are definitely doctrinal differences that divide us, the numbering of the commandments does not need to be one of them, since we all still end up covering and teaching the same content from Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. The important thing is not how we number the Commandments, but that we teach and understand them correctly.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’ [Exod. 20:14], but I tell you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Jesus is following the formula that he repeats throughout this part of his Sermon on the Mount. When he says, “You have heard that it was said...but I tell you,” he is not telling his audience that what they heard or learned was just plain bogus and now he’s going to give them the real deal. No, Jesus is quoting God’s law in the Old Testament. It’s just that so many people in his audience had heard God’s law taught in a perfunctory, superficial way. “You shall not commit adultery”—that is, don’t be getting physically intimate with another person when you’re married to someone else.

Since it was commonly taught that way, there were a lot of things that God meant to be included in that commandment that were regularly violated. Fooling around before you were married was not viewed as adultery by everyone. And after you were married, if there was someone else you really wanted to be intimate with, some rabbis simply cited the clause in the Law where Moses talked about a husband handing his wife a certificate of divorce and sending her away. As long as you followed the law and divorced her properly, it was okay. But since Moses only talked about doing that if the wife fell out of favor with her husband, the question was raised: What legitimately causes disfavor? Some rabbis, though not all, argued that something as simple as burning a meal could cause disfavor, or not being as attractive as another woman the husband might find. So the husband writes the certificate of divorce, hands it to his wife, sends her away, marries the woman that he thinks won’t burn his meals or is more attractive, and no adultery has been committed! Or so many people thought. And of course, simply looking at a beautiful woman and imagining what might be was not committing adultery, many people thought.

Sound familiar? How often haven’t we heard that it’s okay to window shop as long as we don’t make any purchases? How often haven’t we heard that we’re free to do anything until we have a ring on our finger? How often don’t we hear the excuse, when a husband or wife is ogling someone who is not their spouse, “I’m married; I’m not dead!” How often aren’t we told that having fantasies and acting them out is actually a healthy release of internal tension? (There are even websites written by purported health experts that spread this kind of filth.) How often isn’t the concept of abstaining from physical intimacy until marriage laughed to scorn? And how often don’t all these excuses and more come not from outside of us, but from inside of us as we attempt to excuse or justify our own behavior, even as we try to hide it from others?

Jesus is clear: Everyone—whether married or unmarried—who looks at someone who is not their spouse with the desire to be intimate with them—whether they are real or unreal (I’ve heard that excuse too, that the person is only a cartoon person or a computer-generated person)—has already committed adultery with that person in his or her heart, and so also in the eyes of God. And it is no coincidence that, right after talking about lust, Jesus goes on to say, “If your right eye causes you to fall into sin, pluck it out and throw it away from you. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. If your right hand causes you to fall into sin, cut it off and throw it away from you. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.” Notice how he not only talks about the parts of our body we tend to use to gratify our lust, but also what the punishment for

adultery is—hell fire. The apostle Paul says the same thing elsewhere, as does the writer to the Hebrews.

Jesus continues: “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce’ [Deut. 24:1]. But I tell you that whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, causes her to be regarded as an adulteress. And whoever marries the divorced woman is regarded as an adulterer.” On another occasion, some Pharisees asked Jesus why Moses made provision for a husband to give his wife a certificate of divorce if divorce were not permissible? Jesus told them it was because of the hardness of their hearts. In other words, God knew that men were going to leave their wives regardless of what he told them, so he made sure that there was at least some legal regulation to the process, so that utter chaos didn’t reign and marriage wasn’t completely deprived of any meaning.

Now, I know this section is painful for many people, because they’ve experienced divorce. Jesus certainly knew that many in his original audience had experienced divorce too. And even though God says in Malachi he always hates divorce, Jesus acknowledges that there are instances in which God nevertheless permits it. The word Jesus uses to describe when God permits divorce is a graphic word for sexual unfaithfulness. It is not the regular word for adultery. The sexual unfaithfulness could be caused by adultery. It could also be caused by violence and abuse. It could be caused by desertion. It could conceivably be caused by other things. But none of this stopped Jesus from preaching against divorce, because marriage is one of his most beautiful institutions that he created for mankind’s benefit and blessing.

Translators debate whether Jesus is saying that whoever divorces his wife causes her to become an adulteress or causes her to be regarded as an adulteress. But whatever we settle on, we had better not miss the point. I remember sitting in a religion class in a Lutheran high school in Watertown, Wisconsin, and we got to Jesus’s preaching on marriage and divorce, and his exception clause—“except for sexual immorality.” You know what we did for most of that class? We asked, “What about...?” questions. What about this situation? What about this circumstance? What if the husband does this? What if the wife does that? Is it okay to get a divorce then? Perhaps without even realizing it, even before any of us were married, we were trying to find every possible way out of marriage! But Jesus is making it clear that we should be spending much more time wracking our brains and our hearts thinking of how to preserve marriage, rather than dreaming up scenarios and reasons for getting out of it.

Why does Jesus take the Sixth Commandment so seriously? Why does he care so much about it?

It isn’t just because he instituted marriage for our good, since it was not good for the man to be alone. It isn’t just because marriage is one of the most beautiful things on earth, when it’s working the way God intended. (Marriage inspired the first human poetry ever composed.) It isn’t just because marriage teaches us what true love is, since in order for it to succeed you need to find your happiness not in what’s done for you, but in what you can do in service to your spouse and family. It isn’t just because he wants every child to grow up surrounded by the love and protection of a daddy and a mommy. It’s primarily because marriage is meant to be the earthly model of Christ’s relationship with his believers, the Church, his bride.

In that relationship, Jesus is the perfect husband. Everything he does in this marriage, he does with us in mind, for our benefit. He was even willing to give up his life gruesomely to save us. He doesn't respond to us in kind. Paul writes that "if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself" (2 Tim. 2:13). When we turn to him in repentance, no matter how horrible the sin we are repenting of, we will never find him standing there holding out a certificate of divorce, saying, "You know what? I'm tired of this. I've had enough. I never want to see you or hear your voice again." Do you remember what we say in our confession of sins at the beginning of the service, when we quote 1 John? "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

Because of that faithfulness, here are some more statistics for you.

Jesus is 100% true God and 100% true man.

Jesus lived his life as our substitute under God's law 100% without sin. Even though he was never married, was extremely popular among many people, cast out demons from women and rescued them from lives of prostitution, forgave many women their sins unconditionally, and women followed him around in Galilee and cared for his needs, there was never even a hint of a rumor of anything inappropriate. When women talked with Jesus, he gave them his full attention without any ulterior motives and without his eyes ever wandering.

Then Jesus went to the cross and died and paid for 100% of sins, including sins against the Sixth Commandment, paid for every form immorality, including explicit immorality. There is no thought, word, or action, no matter how much it might horrify someone else if it were exposed, that Jesus has not fully paid for, washed away, and forgiven.

So Jesus is not only the perfect husband. He has also made us his perfect bride. He loved us and gave himself up for us to make us holy, cleansing us by the washing with water through the word, and to present us to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless (Eph. 5:25–27).

That's why Jesus cares about the Sixth Commandment so much. When we have been loved so purely as we have been loved by him, how can we not give our utmost to show that love to others, especially to the earthly groom or bride he has given us?

All of you husbands who are married: God gave you your wife. He gave her to you as someone to whom you can show Christ-like, self-sacrificing love every day. All of you wives who are married: God gave you your husband. He gave him to you as someone to whom you can show service and submission (his words, not mine), just as the Church does to Christ.

Don't tear out your eye or cut off your hand. Jesus was talking in extremes to make a point. And the point is this: Do everything in your God-given ability, make use of every God-given resource at your disposal, leave no stone unturned in your effort to keep the devil from dragging you down to hell with sins against the Sixth Commandment. Jesus loves you perfectly, faithfully, and he wants you with him in his eternal home. And brothers and sisters, God has put many helpful resources at our disposal, even besides his word. Come talk to me if you need to be made aware of them. Let's strive to imitate Jesus's love in our own love, turning outside of ourselves to others, especially our wife or husband—just as from eternity, every thought of his has been bent toward us, his cherished bride. Amen.