

Liturgical Date: 6th Sunday after the Epiphany

Text: Matthew 5:27-30

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus. Our text is the gospel from Matthew chapter 5.

Dear saints,

Our text for today is a timely one. This is the third week in a row that we have been in Matthew chapter 5. Each Sunday we have noticed that the text comes to us from an extended sermon preached by Jesus to his disciples so that he might teach them what it means to be a disciple. In the first section, called the beatitudes, we learned about those who are granted access to God's kingdom and access to God's blessing. In the section from last week we talked about the fact that we are set apart from the world as salt and light. This week, that teaching from Jesus about being set apart from the world is described in greater detail as Jesus teaches us lessons about anger, about lust, about Godly marriage, and about Christian integrity. With all of these teachings, Jesus pushes us on toward greater obedience and righteousness toward God.

The Psalm that is appointed for today, the sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, is from Psalm 119. (We did not read it today in our worship but if we did it was verses one through eight.) Verse 9 asks a question. It says:

9 How can a young man keep his way pure?

It then provides the answer...

By guarding it according to your word.

10 With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments!

11 I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.

12 Blessed are you, O Lord; teach me your statutes!

13 With my lips I declare all the rules of your mouth.

14 In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches.

15 I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways.

16 I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word. (Psalms 119:9-16)

So why is this important? Because of what Jesus mentions here today in our gospel; Matthew chapter 5 verse 27. **You have heard that it was said you shall not commit adultery in, but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust full intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.** Jesus teaches us today about the way we use his good gift of the imagination in a way that defiles that gift with impurity and sin.

It is important and useful to talk these things through because we live in a world that has lost the ability to think about these things clearly. We live in a world that has determined that every sexual desire is good. There is no sexual desire that is bad. Every desire should be approved and celebrated. And, in fact, the only wicked thing would be to restrain that desire, because then you would be "sexually repressed". Our world has forgotten those things that previous generations understood - chastity and modesty are virtues to be celebrated and we should strive for them. And so, our world is filled with images and pictures and television programs and TV commercials and music and literature that are all designed to trigger the imagination and defile the imagination with evil and disordered desires – to cause us to covet the body of someone who is not our husband or our wife. Our world is constantly driving us toward lust.

This pattern of thinking has brought no end of trouble for Christians living in the modern world.

For those of us who have grown up in the church and attended catechism class where we study the 6th Commandment and the guard that God places around Christian marriage by forbidding us from adultery we know that this is wrong. We have heard this before and we are not surprised to hear it again now. But we still have to find a way to live in the world.

Over the past several decades there has been a concerted effort to cut down on smoking of cigarettes. It has been determined to be a health hazard and so there are all kinds of no-smoking campaigns. One term that has been coined to help describe the effect of cigarette smoke on those who are not even themselves smoking is this term, "secondhand smoke." The idea is that even if you are not the one holding the cigarette, just the very fact that you are in the same room and breathing the same air means that the smoke gets in your lungs and can still make you sick.

Christians living in the world today face a similar sort of problem with their own attitudes toward sex and the 6th Commandment. A healthy and clear conscience that is attuned to the word of God can be made cloudy and unclear through the secondhand sin that is in the world around us. Our hearts and minds become confused about what is right and wrong to the point that we can even become spiritually sick. This spiritual sickness starts in our hearts or in our imagination, and then it works its way into our behavior. It changes the sorts of things that we think are OK and that are permissible in the Kingdom of God. Our conscience becomes attuned to the world around us instead of to the standards of righteousness spelled out for us by God and his Word.

The good news is that God gives to us the clear teaching of Scripture, and the teaching of God in his word helps to purify our conscience. It leads us to repent of our sins and receive forgiveness from God and purification in the blood of Jesus.

27 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ 28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Matthew 5:27-28 (ESV Strong’s)

“You have heard that it was said,” says Jesus. Question is, who said that? Well, God did. Jesus is quoting the 6th Commandment. **You shall not commit adultery.** But, you see, the 6th Commandment says that you should not commit *adultery*. Adultery is sex with someone who is married to another. There is also this thing called *fornication*, fornication is typically what we could call *pre-marital* sex. That is, sex before you have taken the marriage vows. That fits in there too. But Jesus takes this standard that forbids adultery and fornication, an actual physical behavior and he raises the bar – not just the behavior, but that thing that happens in the imagination, that happens in the privacy of your own heart, your thoughts, Jesus says that even this defiles you. Thus our Catechism says: **You shall not commit adultery. What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we lead a sexually pure and decent life in what we say and do and husband and wife love and honor each other.**

So here it is: the teaching of Jesus is that the disciples of Jesus, those who would follow him and inherit his kingdom, must hold themselves to a higher standard. While the world had this anything goes attitude toward any and every sexual desire that you might have, Jesus says that your desire should be reserved for wife, should be reserved for your husband. And even your use of your imagination should be kept pure and reserved for your spouse.

But see, this is the problem. This is that secondhand sin that we have been breathing in because it’s out there in the culture. To begin with, you can barely access any form of media at all without there being some image or innuendo that sparks your imagination. You would practically have to completely isolate yourself from anything and everything. But still, it’s there. And the fact that it is around us means that we are constantly taking it in and it is impacting the way that we think about things that God in his Word is very clear, so that we in our minds, think of these issues as not so clear. We start to become permissive.

So what do we do.

The first thing is repent. For every Christian and in every situation and with every sin, the first thing we do when confronted with our sin, we repent. God’s law comes, it cuts us to the heart, we see how we have not lived in a way that is subordinate to Him and His law and the good order that he has built into this world. So we repent.

So, dear sinner, there is good news. God has forgiven you. The blood of Jesus has washed away your sin. He has purified you. He has purified your heart and your mind. He has cleansed you from that sinful use of your body, he has cleansed you from your covetousness and your greed. He has cleansed you from the sinful use of your imagination. John 6 records the story of a woman brought to Jesus because she was known to have committed adultery. Jesus said to her, “Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.”¹

“Go and sin no more.” You see, that is the tricky part. How do you go and sin no more. When the secondhand sin is billowing out of every earthly orifice, how do you keep from getting spiritually sick from it?

There is a bit of practical wisdom that is found in St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. He was instructing them in chapter 5 about how they were to avoid all manner of sexual sins because they had been called out of the world to live in the light of God’s truth and God’s grace. And he gives to them this bit of practical advice.

15 Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, 16 making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, 19 addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the

¹ John 8:11

Lord with your heart, 20 giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, 21 submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. (Ephesians 5:15-21)

So, let me break it down for you.

To begin with, be careful. Be wary. Be aware. There are spiritual traps that are set for you all over the place. Know what those traps are. Know what sort of situations cause you temptation and as you are walking through your day, if there is a path that causes you trouble, choose a different path. Proverbs 7 tells the story of a foolish young man who is taken in by an adulterous and it says that he was walking down the street by her corner.² So, in other words, he knew this woman. He knew her reputation. He knew what was going to happen if he went down that street anyway. He should have chosen a different way to go. But he was foolish and so he went anyway. Be very careful how you walk, not unwise but wise... Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

Then Paul says, "Do not get drunk on wine, which is debauchery. But be filled with the Spirit." The thing about wine, the thing about strong drink, whatever it is, is that it lowers your inhibitions. It causes you to think that you are invincible, you can handle anything and nothing will hurt you so you will do anything. The other thing is that it provides for you an out. An excuse. It frees you up to say, "It wasn't me, it was the alcohol." So don't get drunk on wine. Don't put yourself in a situation where you know failure will be inevitable. Instead be filled with the Holy Spirit.

How do you do that? *19 addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, 20 giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, 21 submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

You see, here is the thing. If I were to say to you, "For the next 5 minutes I want you to think about anything but a big yellow school bus." For the next 5 minutes the only thing you would be able to think about is a big yellow school bus. Trying to not think something is a surefire way to think about that very thing. I suspect Paul must have been aware of this, because he doesn't say, "Whatever you do, don't think about sex." Instead, he gives you something else to think about. Something else with which you can fill your brain - Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. And sing out loud. Because your enemy the devil is "prowling around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour"³ and he hates the sound of Christians singing.⁴

The final piece of advice offered by Paul is that you give thanks to God. You see, the problem with lust is that it takes something that God has made, a person, and it turns that person into an idol, so that our hearts are filled with coveting or perhaps with greed. And this is bad. It is not even second hand sin. It is first person sin. Your own sin. Martin Luther famously said that "You can't stop the birds from flying over your head, but you can prevent them from building a nest in your hair." In other words, you can't stop those thoughts from coming, but you can prevent them from taking hold. And Paul's advice helps us in that regard. When the thought comes, instead of trying to force yourself not to think it through the force of your own will, turn it into something good. Turn it into a good thing through prayer. Through thanksgiving to God. God has made that person for whom you are tempted to have that disordered or sinful desire. He or she is God's good creation. You can pray for that person. You can thank God for that person. You can ask God to grant his blessing for that person. And if that person is gracing the cover of a magazine and if that person has forgotten the virtue of modesty, you can assist them... help them to be modest by covering them with eyes that choose not to see.

The final thing that I will say is that there is great blessing that God gives to us when we come here to God's house. There is help, there is supernatural power that God gives to us here. We come here to God's house with a defiled heart and a defiled imagination because of all of the secondhand sin, because of even our firsthand sin. And it causes us no end of shame. We feel guilt. We feel isolated and alone. We feel frustrated. We don't know what to do. So we come here. Satan wants you to stay away from here. He wants you to stay away from Church. He wants you to be alone with your sin so that he can continue to abuse your conscience and manipulate you and make a fool out of you. But all of that is undone when you come to church. You confess your sin and you receive absolution. You are here with other Christians, fellow saints and disciples who are walking the same walk that you are. Who, like you, are trying with all their might to keep their feet on the narrow path. And all of you together are fed by God's Word. You come up here to God's altar and he feeds you His body and blood. He purifies you. He covers you with his blood. He sets you free from your sin.

² Proverbs 7:8

³ Be sober- minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. 9 Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. (1Pe 5:8-9)

⁴ 22 And Saul sent to Jesse, saying, "Let David remain in my service, for he has found favor in my sight." 23 And whenever the harmful spirit from God was upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand. So Saul was refreshed and was well, and the harmful spirit departed from him. (1Sa 16:22-23)

Dear Christian friends, God's word is real. God calls you to be his disciples and he calls you to a higher standard. He puts your feet on a path that is difficult to walk. But he provides you with help. He gives to you his word. He gives to you his body and blood. He gives to you the comfort and consolation of His Spirit. He gives to you a spiritual family, brothers and sisters. You are drawn together in him and in his grace.

In the name of Jesus. Amen

Dealing with Pornography⁵

The regular use of pornography for masturbation is a kind of sexual addiction. When Paul speaks about impurity and sexual greed as idolatry in Ephesians 5:3-7 and Colossians 3:5, he accurately describes how it works. It begins with sexual impurity, the defilement of our imagination by depictions of sexual intercourse that present naked bodies as idols for us to admire. Our fixation on these images arouses disordered desires and make us more and more greedy for sexual satisfaction from things that God has not given to us for our enjoyment. Yet they fail to satisfy us and serve only to feed our growing appetite for them.

If you are going to be freed from your addiction to pornography you can take the following steps to receive help from God.

1. You need to distinguish between your own sense of shame and your guilt before God. Shame can lead to misplaced guilt, guilt about the wrong thing, if it is not guided by God's law, his commandments. And Satan, in turn, uses our misplaced guilt to get us disgusted about ourselves as well as what we have done. Where masturbation is involved, he fills us with disgust at our sexuality and all sexuality as if it were something ugly rather than a gift from God. The more ashamed we become, the more secretive we become; the more secretive we become and the more we hide in the darkness, the more vulnerable we become to the accusation and condemnation of Satan.
2. You need to be careful that Satan does not distort your perception by making a fool of you and getting you to focus on the wrong thing. Nowhere in the Bible is masturbation explicitly forbidden. There is good reason for this because the problem does not come from masturbation, which is in itself neither good or bad, but the adulterous sexual fantasies that accompany it, as Christ makes clear in Matthew 5:28. That's the problem spiritually! That's what causes the trouble. That's what leads to sexual addiction. That's how Satan gets a hold on us through our imagination. If you use pornography to masturbate, you put another woman, an idol that promises heaven and gives you hell, sexually, in the place of your wife. It arouses your greed for what you don't have, greed for what God has not given for you to enjoy, greed that increases as you give in to it. The more you indulge it, the more dissatisfied and empty you become.
3. So focus less on the issue of masturbation and more on your use of pornography and your apparent addiction to it. You have already taken the first most embarrassing and most difficult step by bringing this hidden secret out in to the open, out into the light where it becomes exposed and its power can be broken (Eph 5:8-14). Every time you access pornography tell someone what you have done, your pastor or me or someone else. Don't let what you do and feel lie hidden in darkness, because as long as it remains there Satan uses it against you to accuse and condemn you!
4. Recognize that your apparent addiction to pornography is not just a moral problem which you can overcome by your own will power. It is a kind of spiritual bondage, the means by which Satan manipulates you mentally and emotionally. This means that only Christ can free you from this aspect of the problem with his redeeming blood and his powerful Holy Spirit. Like alcoholism, the key of liberation from addiction to pornography is the admission that you are 'addicted' and that you need God's help to break your addiction. So renounce it before God and hand the problem over to him in prayer; beseech him to set you free from the snares of the evil one. Go to Holy Communion to receive the blood of Jesus to cleanse you from impurity and purify your conscience from acts that kill off the life of God in you (1 John 1:7; Heb 9:14).
5. Since the problem with the use of pornography for masturbation lies in the hold that those sexual images take on your imagination, follow Paul's advice in Ephesians 5:4 by thanking your wife for her love and God for her as your wife! Keep your sexual imagination fixed on her rather than the picture of other naked women as they engage in sexual intercourse. Enjoy her imaginatively rather than just physically! And thank God for her and her love! Offer your body daily to God for transformation by him and your imagination for renewal by his Holy Spirit (Rom 12:1-2)!
6. Since your use of pornography occurs at regular intervals, note when it happens, analyze what leads up to each lapse, and work out how to head it off before it is too late by doing something positive and enjoyable. For most people there is some trigger, such as self-pity or depression or boredom or the need for comfort, that sets off the habitual recourse to the use of pornography for masturbation. If you deal with that, you will have greater success in heading it off.
7. It may be wise for you to restrict your use of the internet at night or when you are alone. You could install a filter or even unsubscribe for a time. At the very least do not keep the addresses of any such site because that makes it far too easy to click onto them.
8. If you want some Lutheran internet resources to help you, here are some that may be of use.

⁵ John Kleinig – downloaded from <http://www.doxology.us/resources/seelsorge-spiritual-treatment/>

- a. · See the Mercy Notes, Volume 4 and 5 from LCMS human Care Ministries at:
www.lcms.org/pages/internal.asp?NavID=2795 ·
- b. The downloadable resource Jesus' Place in MySpace at: www.cph.org
- c. · The booklet on addiction from Ambassadors for Reconciliation at: www.hisaor.org