

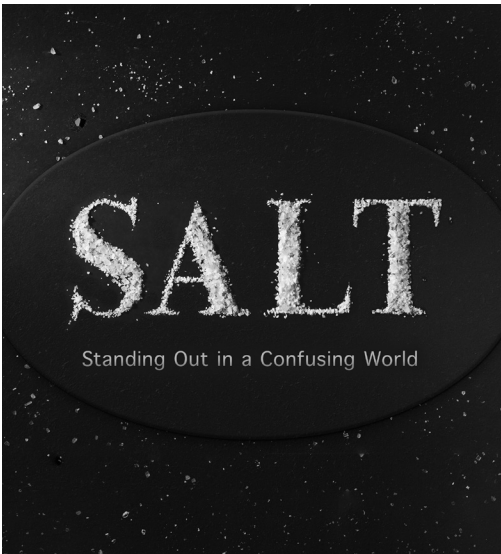


SALT

Standing Out in a Confusing World

Sermon Growth Guide

August 18, 2024
What About Sex?



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Salt - What About Sex?

Matthew 5:27-32

Key Verse: Matthew 5:28

“I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

Big Idea: The holiness and faithfulness God calls us to come from the heart, and what Jesus says is greater and deeper than the written Old Testament law.

Foundations

Jesus always speaks to the heart of the law rather than the letter. He calls us to live our lives with willful, sustained looking, looking in order to lust. Jesus does not advise “Band-Aids” for these sins but amputation—not cautious, careful actions but surgery.

As Dale Bruner writes in *Christ Book*, “Pluck out your eye...cut off your hand.” Removing what seems innocent but is wrongfully used can ruin one’s life. Jesus is not teaching self-mutilation here; even a blind man can lust. But he is saying these losses (hand and eye) cannot compare with the loss of one’s eternal life, eternal separation from God (hell).

Furthermore, in this passage, Jesus addresses marriage. God instituted marriage and loves it. He desires faithfulness in marriage. When that faithfulness is broken, the vows are broken, which breaks God’s intention for marriage.

Understanding God’s Word

Together, read Matthew 5:27-32 How many issues does Jesus address in this passage?

In 5:30-31 Jesus speaks of how sacred God views marriage. Why do you think he singles out unfaithfulness as the only reason to grant a divorce? In the Roman and Jewish culture, only a man could divorce his wife, not vis versa. Why do you think Jesus speaks of what an unlawful, unbiblical divorce would do to the woman?

Applying God’s Word

Jesus is addressing how one should live life from inside out rather than outside in, looking with lust out there in your world affecting your inner being, a man divorcing his wife affecting her status in the culture more than his. Men, how might your behavior and decisions need to change based on these passages? Women, how might you pray for your husband or male friends in this loose sexual culture? If you are married pray for faithfulness emotionally, physically and spiritually in your marriage?

Witnessing God’s Word

Salt must leave the shaker to be effective. We need to leave the sanctuary and let God shake us into the world to spread Christ’s flavor. Pray for God to live through you wherever you are. Choose to be a faithful Christian in the world and in your marriage.

When I was a Youth Pastor, twice a year we delivered what we called “the sex talk.” I hated it. It was awkward, and I always said something unintentionally funny that would stick for years. One year I said marital intimacy was like a fire, it can do great damage, but within the confines of a fireplace it can warm the home if you keep it stoked. For years, guys in youth group yelled across the church, “Stoke that fire, Pastor Tim!” Not the desired effect. These things are difficult to talk about, but necessary. If you are squirming in your seat, imagine being me! Jesus did not shy away from talking about sex, neither should we, but it can have the opposite effect of what was intended.

What effect is intended? In our series, **Salt: Standing Out in a Confusing World**, we are learning that Jesus calls us to stand out in this world. In some ways, we can joyfully agree with our culture, and being salt just draws out the flavor. For example, in the fair treatment of children, education, the elimination of racism and pursuit of equal justice under the law, in community responsibility for poverty and promoting human flourishing. As Christians we say, “Yes and amen!” But, in other areas, we must disagree and stand for God’s ways over the common ways, out of fidelity to God and love for our neighbor. **What About Sex?** That’s the question today. There is no higher roadblock in our times than the biblical, Christian sexual ethic, that God ordained the joys of physical intimacy to be practiced exclusively within the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman. People are scandalized. “Isn’t it horrible and backwards that Christians refuse to accept the simple truth that love is love in whatever form?” But even this can become an open door to the gospel of Jesus Christ. We bemoan our times, living as we are in the toxic tailwaters of the sexual revolution; we are past “anything goes” to “everything is celebrated, or else!” But the truth is, the Christian sexual ethic has always stood out. There is no period in history in which it was easy to preach this sermon.

Never. Not even the day Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matthew 5:27-28) Where did they hear, “You shall not commit adultery”? Out in the streets? In the Roman bathhouses? The Ten Commandments. It’s number seven, narrowly defined as cheating on your spouse. Jesus is not tossing it out. That’s a good law. But like last week, Jesus is more concerned with the direction of your heart than the limitations of your behavior. We may keep the letter of the law and permit ourselves to do everything just short of the act itself. Jesus not only upholds the law but broadens it to include the inclinations of the heart. Even to look with lustful intent, Jesus says, is to transgress. We can include images, websites, videos, and the like. Adultery in Jesus’ view is not only going outside of marriage, but any extramarital sex and the inclination of the heart to imagine it. Our church’s constitution calls us to, “maintain chastity in thought and deed, being faithful within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman as established by God at the creation or embracing a celibate life as established by Jesus in the new covenant.” (ECO Essential Tenets) That’s what Jesus is outlining here. That is what holiness demands.

Why? Why such a narrow view? Isn’t this just one of the joyful, recreational activities of life? Jesus raises the bar severely, doesn’t He? It would be better to gouge out your eye or cut off your hand. Your body is not your own. Jesus also raised the bar on divorce. In a society where women were treated like property and divorce was declared by a husband with a word, there was a provision in Jewish law to protect women (who could rarely fend for themselves) from being thrown out on the street. But Jesus raised the bar even further. Divorce should only happen in the extreme, with every other option



exhausted. Now, we do believe divorce is allowable. In fact, First Pres is known for our Divorce Recovery class when people had nowhere else to turn. But Jesus uses the word “adultery” to describe some of what may happen here, some categories of the rupture of marriage. It is not to be taken lightly.

Why such a high bar? A narrow view? Again, we see how Jesus gets inside us. He is concerned with the direction of your heart more than the limitations of your behavior. Why is that glance so damaging? Or, not a glance; let’s not add a burden. The glance and the appreciation of beauty could be warranted, but when you allow the imagination to linger, you are no longer looking at that woman as a beautiful child of God, or women, you are no longer looking at that man as an image of the Creator. The glory of marriage is in its faithfulness over time. We have a couple here in this church who have enjoyed 75 years of marriage! But when you let your gaze turn to lustful imagination, you are not imagining the glories and struggles of a long, faithful marriage, a reflection of God’s faithful love for us as His Bride, the church, are you? No. In your mind that person is reduced to a body you imagine using like an instrument for your own personal gratification. It is dehumanizing. She is no longer someone’s daughter, sister, friend, citizen, she is not a person at all, just an instrument for your pleasure. See how damaging that is? That’s why it matters to Jesus and why Jesus wants it to matter to us.

Sex is a beautiful, wondrous creation of God; a gift from God. A gift to be treasured and protected within the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman. The traditional, Presbyterian liturgy for a wedding opens with Scripture and Prayer, then moves to a Declaration of the Gift of Marriage. “God created us male and female, and gave us marriage so that husband and wife may help and comfort each other, living faithfully together in plenty and in want,

in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, throughout all their days. God gave us marriage for the full expression of the love between a man and a woman. In marriage a woman and a man belong to each other, and with affection and tenderness freely give themselves to each other. God gave us marriage for the well-being of human society, for the ordering of family life, and for the birth and nurture of children. God gave us marriage as a holy mystery in which a man and a woman are joined together, and become one, just as Christ is one with the church.” (Book of Common Worship) It is a good summary.

Where does all that come from? Human tradition? No. It emerges from Genesis 1-2, the story of creation and the way God weaved the fabric of the universe. “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:27)

But of all that God made good, it was not good that man should be alone. So, God created woman and set man and woman before one another, and, as it says, “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.” (Genesis 2:24) Jesus quoted that verse when He declared that every marriage is an act of God the Creator, adding, “Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” (Mark 10:9) The Bible never deviates from this ethic of marriage, finally declaring that its ultimate value is not in mutual satisfaction, or procreation, or as a building block for civilized societies, although it is all those things. Its ultimate value is as a model of God’s love for us. “This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.” (Ephesians 5:32) We could go on, but I will have to leave you to read and study on your own why marriage matters to God.

We all know intimacy is powerful. We pretend it is recreational, but the power



and weight of it are beyond pretense. We feel it when we see children abused or trafficked, when we see rape as an act of war, when we recognize its power to bring new life—an unborn child, and when we ourselves feel the weight of conscience when we transgress and pretend it is simple play, only to wake up one day heavy with regret. My pastor friend recently said it is not just a fire in the fireplace, it is more like a nuclear power plant. The reactor itself may be the size of a Volkswagen Bug, but it needs thick concrete walls, systems of lakes of water and 600-foot cooling towers to keep it from causing damage! Outside those bounds, it will melt your face off! But contained it will power a city with life. God contained it in marriage.

“Tim, what about this? What about that? What about my case? Why can’t you just get up there and say, ‘love is love’ and be done with it?” Well, that would be easier. But it would not be salt. It would not be faithful to Jesus either. Rebecca McLaughlin is a Cambridge-educated scholar who wrote 2020’s Christianity Today Book of the Year, *Confronting Christianity*. She says things that at first appear as offensive barriers to Christian faith, these roadblocks, hard teachings, they can become gateways to knowing Jesus. The Christian sexual ethic did more to protect women and children than any other force in history. The promises of happiness with the dissolution of sexual boundaries have not paid off. There is more to life than sex and many ways to find the fullness of it, including single life in intentional community. It could just be that Jesus’ teaching is an act of abiding love.

But, nonetheless, as McLaughlin writes, “By Jesus’ definition, every adult Christian is guilty of sexual sin... We cannot read the Bible and not be offended—condemned even—unless we come as broken sinners. If we come like that, we are tenderly embraced.” Thank God. This is not an arena for us to puff ourselves up with pride, is it?

One of my teachers in grade school had a method of discipline. She didn’t say anything when you misbehaved; she simply turned and wrote your name on the chalkboard in the upper right-hand corner. It meant, “Stop at my desk before you exit for recess.” With this one, all our names are on the board. My name is up there. So is yours. No one is free from conviction on this. We all have our story. Yours is different from mine, hers from his, but we all have a story. Your story does not disqualify you from being part of God’s story. In fact, it is the gate to pass through.

We are all, equally, reliant on the grace of God found in Jesus who died for us to take the penalty on our behalf. Jesus said, if you want to earn your own way, your righteousness would have to exceed the scribes and Pharisees—you’d have to out-righteous the righteous! What He means is there is no hope that way. But that does not mean we change or abandon the teaching. The teaching is clear. What it means is that we turn to Jesus our Savior truly realizing, maybe for the first time, that He and He alone is our only hope. Not our pride. Not our self-justification. Jesus, who erased those names on the chalkboard and wrote His own when He went to the cross for us. We exchange our unrighteousness for His righteousness, because He made our unrighteousness His on the cross. How do we move forward? Not with pride and self-assurance, boldly claiming our rights to self-determination. No. With humility and hope for forgiveness in Christ. That’s where true life is found. This passage to forgiveness, and freedom, and hope, and new life, this passage can only be entered by turning to Jesus to save. Like the low door to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, the only way to enter is to bow your head.

