

YOU HAVE HEARD...[PART II]

Matthew 5:27-48

To begin with we need to hear again Jesus' introduction to this section of his sermon on the mount:

¹⁷“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ... ²⁰For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. [Matthew 5:17-20, TNIV]

In the following verses, verses 21 to 48, Jesus gives examples of what he means. Last week we looked at murder. Today we will only have time to deal with adultery. We will continue with the rest next Sunday.

²⁷“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ...

³¹“It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³²But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

Again, we need to note the pattern Jesus is using. Each section begins with the phrase *You have heard that it was said...* What Jesus does is quote the command from the Ten Commandments, but also includes something of the teaching of *the Pharisees and the teachers of the law*. So here Jesus says *You shall not commit adultery* – one of the Ten Commandments, and adds the teaching of the Pharisees and scribes about divorce. And he teaches how the disciples' keeping of the law is to surpass all this: *But I tell you...*

These verses have often been used to teach about the sanctity of marriage, and the importance of fidelity and purity for everyone, whether married or not. And that's true.

But I'm going to follow a different line of thought today.

What seems to me to be the underlying matter here is shame: treating people shamefully and behaving shamefully. And what this really means, at heart, is failing to treat the other person as a person, but only as an object.

It's interesting that the account of the creation of the man and woman in Genesis Chapter 2 concludes with: *The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame* [TNIV].

After the Fall they must cover their nakedness, for they are ashamed. And before God that shame is expressed as fear, and so they try to hide from God [Gen 3:10].

By the way, we need to note that shame can be caused for many reasons - good and bad. And is expressed in many ways. There is the shame expressed as embarrassment over being praised before other people. There is the shame that is expressed as fear when caught out. And there is the shame expressed as anger when one's plans are sent awry by others.¹ And there's many more.

Here Jesus is dealing with social shame, which is expressed as righteous indignation aimed at the shamed.

In that culture and time, where lineage is determined by the father, the fidelity of women is of utmost importance.

And that's why so much of the rules about adultery and divorce were aimed at the woman.

To further complicate matters, one's family lineage was also closely tied to one's land inheritance as an Israelite – the land God promised to Abraham as an inheritance. The Book of Ruth is a delightful story about this matter.

For a woman to commit adultery, this was an enormous shame. It brought into question the legitimacy of her children, especially the sons and their right to inherit the family's portion of the land of Israel.

For a woman to be divorced was an also enormous shame. It brought shame on her and her family! Who would marry a divorced woman?

What is astounding is that Jesus takes this rule about fidelity and divorce and 'shoves it in the face', so to speak, of this male-dominated culture.

He turns the spotlight on the men, for their shameless treatment of women when it comes to fidelity and divorce.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. He goes deeper.

²⁸*But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.* ²⁹*If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.* ³⁰*And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.*

We need to note that these verses are aimed at the men. For in that culture it was thought that it was always the woman's fault if a man was 'led astray'.

Again, that's why so many of the rules about adultery and divorce were aimed at the woman. But here Jesus turns the spotlight on the men.

¹ www.psychologytoday.com/blog/anger-in-the-age-entitlement/200901/anger-problems-smokescreen-fear-shame-phobia

The Old Testament law, though, was aimed at both the male and the female: *If a man commits adultery with another man's wife—with the wife of his neighbor—both the adulterer and the adulteress are to be put to death* [Leviticus 20:10, TNIV]. By Jesus' time it seems only the adulteress was considered the 'evil doer'. It's interesting that in the account of the woman caught in adultery [John 8], the teachers of the law and the Pharisees say *In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women*, conveniently forgetting that the Law says both the male and the female are to be killed! "Susanna", a book of the Old Testament Apocrypha, is a delightful story from the time between the Testaments that reflects this change.

Anyway, back to the point.

Jesus is going far beyond the marriage relationship. These words are like a sharp stick poking at the heart of all of us, male and female.

Imagine, then, if Jesus' words were kept literally. ²⁹*If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. ...* ³⁰*And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away.* I reckon there would be an awful lot of half-blind, half-maimed people about!

I actually think the emphasis is in the phrase *to be thrown into hell* – to be eternally separated from God.

How important is it in your life to have removed out of it anything that could cause you to be separated from God forever?

To go even deeper: we need cutting out of our lives that shameless hardheartedness that leads to treating other people shamefully – merely as objects for our own satisfaction and desires and amusement.

The flip side to shame, then, is respect and honour.

It makes perfect sense to me, then, that, when St Paul wrote about marriage, the first thing he wrote about is respect and honour for the other person:

²¹*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.* ²²*Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. ...* ²⁵*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her* [Ephesians 5:21-33, TNIV]

So instead of treating others shamefully, we lift each other up as someone precious to the Lord and therefore precious to us.

To pick up the thought from Genesis: *The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.* No! I'm not advocating a nudist church! Feeling ashamed is an all too real matter in our lives. And it needs to be there. A society that feels no shame has gone terribly wrong!

No. What I mean is the Christian fellowship that knows it is made up of sinners, and yet continues to honour and respect and encourage one another. To be like Christ, who fulfilled the Law, by being a friend of

sinners, who welcomed them and ate dinner with them. As we hear in Galatians:

¹Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. ²Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ [Galatians 6:1-2, TNIV].

Amen.