Turn in your Bibles with me to Matthew chapter 5. We’re continuing our study of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Over the past several weeks we’ve been working our way through the chunk of teaching in verses 17-48. In this section, Jesus begins to describe the type of righteousness that is required in the kingdom of heaven. He emphasizes over and over that true righteousness isn’t just about a change in behavior. It’s about a change in heart. And the only way we will ever be righteous enough to get into the kingdom of heaven is if our hearts are absolutely, completely and totally, perfectly righteous. We see that in verse 48 when Jesus says, *“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”* And that means every single one of us has to face the fact that we flat out are not good enough to meet God’s standards for the kingdom of heaven. We’re not going to get in on our own. And that’s why it’s such an overwhelming and beautiful relief to hear Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:6 when He tells us that God will fill us with the righteousness we need. That is the great truth of Christianity: Even though we are completely unrighteous on our own, God’s grace makes us truly righteous in Jesus.

And in the biggest portion of verses 17-48, Jesus gives us several examples to help us understand what His righteousness looks like. And as we read these example, what we see over and over is that the standards are impossibly high. No matter how good our external behavior may look, there is absolutely no chance that our hearts are going to be pure enough to meet Jesus’ demands. Jesus shatters any illusion we may have that we might possibly be able to perform well enough to please God. It’s not going to happen, because God sees through our performance and looks into our hearts, and our hearts just aren’t pure enough. So every time we look at a piece of Jesus’ teaching in verses 17-48, we need to realize that we are in way over our heads. We cannot live up to Jesus’ teaching on our own. And Jesus really does expect us to live up to His teaching. But the good news is, He doesn’t expect us to do it on our own. He expects us to do it by His grace. Even though the standards are impossibly high for us, they aren’t for Jesus. And if we follow Jesus and start living by His grace instead of our own effort, this is what our lives will look like.

And it very well may be the case that out of all the examples Jesus gives, our text today is the one that most clearly demonstrates Jesus’ teaching for us in our world right now. We’re looking at verses 27-32. And in these verses Jesus teaches what our lives should look like when it comes to the issues of adultery, lust, and divorce. And if there’s any area in our culture where we are clearly in over our heads and not living up to Jesus’ standards, it’s this area. And if there’s any area where followers of Jesus desperately need to live by His grace and be different from the rest of the world, it’s this area. Sexual immorality is so rampant and the divorce rates are so ridiculous in our culture that we desperately need the grace of God to change our hearts and make us different as followers of Jesus. This is one of the primary areas where the battle is raging in our day. And if our hearts are truly changed… if we honor our marriages and live lives of sexual purity… our purity will stand out as a beacon of light in a sexually dark culture. As Jesus says, people will see our good deeds and praise God in heaven. You see, sexual purity is so rare in our world that people are going to notice it when they see it. In the midst of such widespread immorality, our sexual purity will stand out. And that means we have the opportunity to display the power of the grace of God through our transformed lives. It is precisely because we face such great challenges when it comes to sexual purity in our culture that we also have such a great opportunity to point people to Jesus by the power of our changed lives. So I pray the grace of God will work in our hearts and make us pure like Jesus. So read with me, Matthew 5:27-32. Jesus says, *"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, 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. And if your right hand causes you to sin, 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.*

*"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.”*

This text reminds us of two major aspects of Jesus’ teaching that we are seeing over and over in this sermon. First, it reminds us that Jesus is concerned with your heart even more than your actions. Jesus is not just concerned with what you do on the outside. He’s concerned with who you become on the inside. Look at verses 27-28. Jesus says, *"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”* Jesus is not simply concerned that you never commit an adulterous act. Jesus is concerned that you don’t even have a lustful heart. Jesus is concerned with your heart even more than your actions.

And that’s directly connected to the other aspect of Jesus’ teaching that our text reminds us of. Our text reminds us that Jesus raises the bar when it comes to righteousness. Notice how Jesus raises the bar in these verses. In verse 27, He says, *"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.'*  That’s the outward behavior. And the religious leaders thought as long as they followed that rule by not engaging in the act of adultery, they were righteous. But look at what Jesus says in verse 28. He says, *“But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”* Jesus raises the bar of righteousness to include your heart and not just your actions. He says, “It’s important not to commit adultery. But that’s not enough. Your heart has to be just as pure as your actions.” You see, Jesus knows that even if you’ve never committed adultery in your entire life, that’s no guarantee that you’re truly righteous. It may just be that you’ve never had the opportunity to commit adultery, or you’re afraid you’ll get caught, or you’re so full of pride that you can’t bring yourself to risk your reputation. And even though you never commit adultery, your heart may be eaten up with lust just the same. So Jesus is not just concerned that you don’t commit adultery. He’s concerned that the reason you don’t commit adultery is because you truly have a pure heart.

Jesus teaches the same truth in another way in verses 31-32. In verse 31, He says, *"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.'* You see, the religious leaders in Jesus’ day had created a convenient loophole in the law to avoid committing adultery. They interpreted Moses’ instructions about divorce in Deuteronomy 24 to mean that as long as a man gave his wife a certificate of divorce, it was okay for him to divorce her. So the most convenient way to avoid adultery was to give your wife the certificate, divorce her, and then marry the new woman so that you were not technically having an affair. Following the strict legalistic definition, that’s not adultery. But listen to Jesus’ response in verse 32. *“But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.”*

Jesus says, “Look, maybe technically it’s not adultery if you get divorced first. Maybe technically you can’t cheat on someone if you’re not married to them anymore. But here’s the thing, the spirit of the law is not just about your actions. It’s about your heart. And if you divorce your spouse for any reason other than marital unfaithfulness, you have violated God’s intent for marriage just as much as if you committed adultery. A nice, clean divorce doesn’t protect your marriage from adultery. Divorce destroys your marriage.” So Jesus points out once again that it’s not enough just to avoid the act of adultery. You have to have a heart that honors God by honoring marriage.

So, we’re reminded of these two overarching aspects of Jesus’ teaching: (1) Jesus is concerned with your heart even more than your actions. And because of that, (2) Jesus raises the bar when it comes to righteousness. And in today’s text, the way Jesus raises the bar is by pointing out that simply avoiding adultery doesn’t make you sexually pure. Divorce and lust are just as big of issues as adultery. And my prayer for us as followers of Jesus is that the truth of Jesus’ teaching will convict us at this point. A lot of us may be tempted to think, “Hey, I’ve never committed adultery, so I’m doing pretty good.” Or for you teenagers and young adults and singles, maybe you’re thinking, “Hey, I’ve never had premarital sex, so I’m doing pretty good.” But my prayer is that Jesus will shake you out of the temptation to trust in your self-righteousness. I pray that His Word will pierce your heart and expose any impurity that may be lurking there. So make sure you hear what Jesus is saying in this text. Jesus is saying that if you view pornography, if you watch sexually explicit movies, if you enter chat rooms and lust sexually or emotionally over the person you’re chatting with, if you view sexually suggestive movies or TV shows or commercials or billboards that cause you to lust, or even if you never look at any of those things with your eyes, but you entertain the thoughts in your mind, the presence of lust in any form reveals that you are an adulterer in your heart. And let me tell what you that means. It means that you have committed adultery. It means that I have committed adultery. It means that we all have committed adultery. And the reason it’s so important for us to face that fact is not so that we will be racked with guilt. It’s so that we will be compelled to turn to God and to throw ourselves completely on His grace… Because we desperately need God’s grace to make us sexually pure, both in heart and action. Sexual immorality is a plague in our day… and not just in the world, but also in the church. A lot of studies indicate that a frightening number of church members – and even pastors – view pornography regularly. Even more studies suggest that divorce rates are the same in the church as they are in the world. We desperately need the grace of God to help us live out Jesus’ teaching about sexual purity.

So in the rest of our time together, we’re going to focus on the two areas of sexual purity that Jesus emphasizes in our text. He emphasizes that the purity of our hearts must extend to the areas of lust and divorce. And I want to take those in reverse order and start with Jesus’ teaching on divorce. The reason I want to address divorce first is because there are some complications that come from trying to interpret Jesus’ teaching here, and I don’t want those to distract us from the main point of the text for very long. So, I’d like to give you a brief overview this morning, and then we’ll come back tonight and look at Jesus’ teaching on divorce in more detail. When Jesus says, *“I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness…”* the difficulty surrounds the meaning of “marital unfaithfulness.” You see, the specific Greek word for adultery is *moicheia*. That’s the word Jesus uses at the end of verse 32. However, in the middle of verse 32, Jesus doesn’t use that word. He uses the more generic word *porneia*. Our English word pornography comes directly from *porneia*, because *porneia* designates sexual immorality of any kind, and not just adultery. That’s why Jesus’ teaching gets translated so many different ways in our English versions of the Bible. The NIV translates it as “marital unfaithfulness.” The King James translates it as “fornication.” The English Standard translates it as “sexual immorality.” And those are all legitimate translations of *porneia*. But it raises the question of exactly what Jesus has in mind here. There are two main schools of thought among faithful Bible scholars. Some say that Jesus means that divorce is allowed in the case of adultery. That is the most straightforward reading of the text. However, others think that if Jesus had adultery in mind He would have used the actual word for adultery. So they believe that He’s referring to sexual immorality that occurs before marriage, specifically during the engagement period, and He’s saying you’re allowed to break your *engagement* for that reason, but not your *marriage*. In that case, divorce is never allowed, even in the case of adultery. I want you to know that both of these interpretations are possible. Both are seeking to honor Scripture. Based on my best understanding of the evidence, I believe the first is more accurate. I believe Jesus is saying that adultery can be legitimate grounds for divorce. Now, Jesus is not saying you *should* get divorced in the case of adultery. He’s just saying you can. One quick reason why I believe this interpretation is best is because there are other places in Scripture where *porneia* includes the idea of adultery, such as 1 Corinthians 5 where Paul uses *porneia* to describe the adulterous affair between a man and his stepmother. Plus, this interpretation makes much more sense of what Jesus is saying here. He’s saying that divorce is just as bad as adultery because both violate the marriage covenant. But that’s not the case if the reason you get divorced is because your spouse committed adultery. In that case, the marriage covenant was already violated by the adultery, and therefore, even if you choose divorce, you are not the one who broke the covenant.

Now, with that said, let me emphasize two things. First, there is room for disagreement over this interpretation. We’ll go into more detail tonight. But what I ask is that we all be as diligent as we can in our interpretation of Scripture, we follow the leading of the Holy Spirit in our own personal conscience, and we graciously allow others to do the same.

Second, and in some ways, more importantly, don’t allow the difficulty of this one detail to cause you to miss the emphasis of Jesus’ teaching here. Whether Jesus allows divorce in the case of adultery or not, He is emphasizing that marriage is sacred and should be taken very seriously. You see, the religious leaders in Jesus’ day said you could get divorced for pretty much any reason you wanted, as long as you gave your spouse the certificate of divorce. Sounds frighteningly similar to our culture today. How many divorces happen, not because of the extreme cases of adultery or abuse, but because of the safety net of irreconcilable differences? And Jesus says, “Just having a legal reason doesn’t make divorce okay. Only in the most extreme circumstances, and maybe never, should you get divorced. Marriage is holy and sacred and deserves your wholehearted committed.” However we interpret Jesus’ teaching, He raises the bar on our commitment to marriage.

The other thing Jesus emphasizes is that there are no loopholes when it comes to your sexual purity. Remember, the religious leaders were claiming that if they got divorced first, they weren’t really committing adultery, because they weren’t married anymore. That was their loophole. But Jesus says, “If you get divorced for just any old reason, you’ve violated the marriage covenant just as if you committed adultery.” There are no loopholes when it comes to your sexual purity.

And teenagers and single adults, I especially hope that you will hear Jesus’ teaching at this point. Our society condones all sorts of sexual behavior that isn’t quite sexual intercourse. It’s the loophole for not having sex outside marriage. But I want you to know, Jesus is not concerned that you don’t have sex. Did you hear that? Jesus is not concerned that you don’t have sex. He’s concerned that you be pure in your heart. And it’s very possible for you to never have sex before marriage, but to have a very impure heart because of everything else you do. And I want you to hear me say this very clearly: Your purity is not just a question of “How close can I get to the line without having sex?” Your purity is a question of, “Is my heart focused on Jesus Christ? Am I pursuing Jesus so passionately that I’m not even looking at the line?” Your purity is not about how close you can get to the line. It’s about how close you can get to Jesus. And that’s why there are no loopholes when it comes to sexual purity.

The last thing I want to say before we move on to Jesus’ teaching on lust is that if you are here this morning and divorce is something that has already happened in your past, I want you to know that Jesus’ desire is not to condemn you. Jesus’ desire is that in any area where you have failed to meet His standards, you will throw yourself completely on His grace and be forgiven and be changed so that you can live differently from this point forward. No matter what your past may be, Jesus does not write you off. So find forgiveness and hope in Jesus today.

Okay, on to Jesus’ teaching about lust and purity. Look at what Jesus says about dealing with lust in verses 29-30. He says, *“If your right eye causes you to sin, 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. And if your right hand causes you to sin, 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.”*

Now, it would be an unfortunate mistake if we took Jesus literally here and thought that He means we should gouge out an eye and cut off a hand. There is a huge reason why we know that’s not what He means. Remember, Jesus has emphasized over and over that He is concerned with your heart, not just your actions. If you have a lustful heart, gouging out your eye and cutting off your hand is not going to fix that. #1, because you’ve still got another eye and another hand to carry out the lust of your heart. And #2, even if you gouge out both eyes and cut off both hands, your heart is still the problem. You can be blind and lame and lust more than ever if you don’t fix your heart.

Remember, Jesus is the master teacher. He uses every teaching method possible to get His point across. And in this case, He uses hyperbole… He uses exaggerated language… in order to get our attention and help us see how big of a deal the purity of our hearts really is. So when Jesus says, “If your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off,” He’s teaching us at least two things. First of all, Jesus is saying, “You need to take purity seriously. You need to realize how big of a deal this is. It’s such a big deal that removing body parts is not out of the question. Heaven and hell hang in the balance. Do whatever it takes to ensure the purity of your heart.” You need to take purity seriously.

The second thing Jesus teaches us here is that we should be very practical in the way we deal with sexual sin. If your eye causes you to sin, get rid of your eye. If your hand causes you to sin, get rid of your hand. In other words, if your computer causes you to sin, get rid of your computer. If you have to have a computer, download a program that sends a report of your web sites to an accountability partner. If a movie causes you to sin, don’t watch it. If prime time TV causes you to sin, don’t watch it. If going on a date causes you to sin, only hang out in groups. Jesus basically says, “Be smart about this. Cut off the source of the problem. Don’t play with fire.” In a sense, don’t over-spiritualize this. Take the practical steps necessary to ensure the purity of your heart.

So I want to take Jesus’ teaching seriously here, and I want to offer some practical advice for pursuing purity in your life. But before I share these two lists with you, I want to emphasize two things. First of all, don’t miss Jesus’ point entirely and treat these like legalistic demands. These lists are just wise counsel to help guide you toward purity. Second, don’t miss Jesus’ point entirely and think that with enough will power and determination you can keep these lists and make yourself pure. You can’t. Only the grace of God can change your heart and make you pure. So pray that God would pour out His grace through these practical steps and use them to help make you pure.

Okay… I have included each of these lists in your worship guide today, because I want you to be able to refer to them easily and regularly. This first list comes from a sermon John Piper preached. Piper says:

#1) Avoid unnecessary sexual stimulation. Obviously, this includes pornography and X-rated movies. But the real test is what you do with the more subtle sources of sexual stimulation: PG movies, Time magazine, the newspaper, television, magazine covers, music lyrics. In our society you can’t escape sexual stimulation, but you can refuse to seek it. And you can avoid it often when you see it coming. This is the great test of whether we are enslaved or free: Can we say no to the slave driver in our bodies who wants us to keep on looking and keep on lusting?

#2) Don't spend too much time alone. Be with Christian people often. Don't forsake the assembling of yourselves together, but encourage one another, stir each other up to love and good works. Talk of your struggles with trusted friends. Pray for each other and hold each other accountable.

#3) Keep yourself busy, and when it is time for leisure, choose things that are pure, lovely, gracious, excellent, worthy of praise ([Philippians 4:8](http://bible.logos.com/passage/esv/Philippians%204.8)). Idleness in a world like ours is asking for trouble. It is much harder for sexual temptation to gain a foothold when we are busy at some productive task.

#4) (And this one is really powerful) Strive to think of all people, especially people of the opposite sex, in relation to eternity. It is not easy to fantasize about a person if you think about the eternal torment they may shortly be suffering in hell because of their unbelief. Nor is it easy to disrobe in your imagination a person you know to be an eternal sister or brother in Christ. Paul said in [2 Corinthians 5:16](http://bible.logos.com/passage/esv/2%20Corinthians%205.16), *"From now on we know no one according to the flesh."* We view everybody from God's eternal perspective.

#5) Bathe your mind in God's Word. Jesus prayed, *"Sanctify them in the truth. Your word is truth"* ([John 17:17](http://bible.logos.com/passage/esv/John%2017.17)).

There is nothing that renews the mind and enables it to assess things God's way like regular meditation on the Word of God. The person who does not arm himself with the sword of the Spirit is going to lose in the battle for his or her body.

#6) Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and He will add to you everything you need sexually. It may be a spouse. It may be the grace and freedom to be single and pure and content. That is up to God. Our job is to seek the kingdom. Or to put it another way, our all-consuming passion must be to glorify God in our bodies by keeping ourselves free from every enslavement but one: the joyful, fulfilling slavery to God.

#7) Pray that God would give you, in ever-increasing strength, a longing to know and love and obey him above all else. There is no better way to overcome a bad desire than to push it out with a new one. It is in prayer that we summon the divine help to produce in us that new desire for God.

I pray that list will be helpful for you as you battle lust and pursue purity in your heart. Now, parents, this second list is especially for you. I feel strongly that not only do we need practical advice concerning our own sexual purity, but we also need practical advice concerning the sexual purity of our children. So, here are 8 suggestions:

1. Don’t wait too long to start talking to your children about sex. Remember what it was like when you were 12. It’s worse now, and it starts earlier.
2. Talk to them about the dangers and pervasiveness of pornography on the internet. Download a program that monitors their internet activity and sends you email reports… and don’t do it secretly. Let them know you are trying to encourage their purity, and talk to them about the reports.
3. Don’t subscribe to movie channels that show sexually explicit movies. If you have to put a password on a channel, you’re setting a bad example by even having it on your TV.
4. Don’t allow them to date too young.
5. Don’t allow them to be home alone with the opposite sex.
6. Don’t allow them to be in the bedroom with the opposite sex. For any reason.
7. Don’t allow them to be behind closed doors with the opposite sex.
8. Don’t take this lightly. It is a plague on the children in our culture. Don’t be afraid when they come to you with questions. Rejoice that they are being open and honest. Be afraid if they never come to you with questions! That doesn’t mean it’s not an issue; that just means they are hiding it well!

Parents, I pray that, in so far as it depends on you, you will be diligent in leading your children toward sexual purity. That is a monumental task in our culture, so I pray that you will be driven to the grace of God, and that you will depend on Him to do what only He can do in your children’s hearts.

And then as we close, I want to share one last piece of advice for all us as we seek to replace lust with purity. And I would guess that some of you are going to find this piece of advice to be very strange when you first hear it, but I think it may be one of the most powerful strategies for combating lust that I have ever heard. Once again, I’m indebted to John Piper for this great truth.

Piper says, “When (a lustful) desire starts to rise, perform a very conscious act of transfer onto Christ. I wish I had learned this much earlier in my life. While riding down the road, if some billboard or marquee puts a desire into my mind for some illegitimate sexual pleasure, I take that desire and say, ‘Jesus, you are my Lord and my God, and my greatest desire is to know and love and obey you, so this desire is really for you. I take it from your competitor, I purge it, and I direct it to you. Thank you for freeing me from the bondage of sin.’ It is remarkable what control we can gain over the direction our desires take if we really long to please Christ.”

Piper hits on so many powerful truths in that piece of advice. First of all, he reminds us that pleasure itself is not sinful, and desire itself is not sinful. God created all pleasures, including sexual pleasures, and He created us so that we are able to enjoy pleasures, including sexual pleasures. Psalm 16:11 says of God, *“At your right hand arepleasures forevermore.”* God is the God of pleasure, which means that pleasure is not sinful. The same is true of desire. There are many things that are good for us to desire. We should desire the glory of God. We should desire the salvation of all people. We should desire to be like Jesus. We should desire to love one another and serve one another. Desire, in and of itself, is not sinful. Pleasure and desire only become sinful when we seek pleasure in the wrong way, or when we desire the wrong things. You see, Satan cannot create a single pleasure or desire to tempt us to sin. All he can do is take the good pleasures and good desires that God has created and twist them and distort them into something they weren’t supposed to be. In other words, sin is always a distortion of something good. And one of the things we know about the work of Jesus is that He came to redeem that which has been distorted by sin. Sin twisted it. Jesus sets it straight.

So Piper applies this truth to our twisted lustful desires. The problem with lust is that it is the wrong type of desire for the wrong thing. It’s sexual desire for someone other than your spouse. And that is sinful, because that is not what God intends for us. And the cure is to allow Jesus to redeem that desire. You see, the deepest, most powerful desire in your life should be for God Himself. You should love God and long for God and be satisfied in Him. And that means any lustful desire is a distortion of what should be your passionate love for God. And if you can recognize that truth at the moment you are tempted by lust, then you can reclaim the desire that sin has twisted, and Jesus can straighten it out and redeem it and redirect it to its rightful source. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 10:5, *“We take every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ.”* We take our lust captive and it is redeemed and made obedient and turned into love for Jesus.

And what’s so great about this approach is that it captures the heart of Jesus’ teaching. We aren’t just avoiding sinful behavior. We’re developing righteous character. Jesus doesn’t just want you to stop lusting. He wants you to start loving Him. So each time a lustful desire enters your mind, reclaim that desire for Jesus and pray, “Jesus, my greatest desire is to know you and love you and obey you, so I know this desire is really for you. I take it from your competitor and I purge it and I give it back to you. May you be honored by my desire for you.”

I pray that will be a mighty weapon in your arsenal as you battle lust in our sex-crazed world. I pray you will experience the victory and the freedom of having your lust redeemed as love for Jesus. Don’t just stop lusting. Start loving Jesus.

  And as we close, remember: Jesus is concerned with your heart even more than your actions. Jesus raises the bar when it comes to righteousness. And Jesus gives you the grace you need to live up to His standards. So when it comes to sexual purity, I pray that we won’t settle for just avoiding adultery or just avoiding any particular behavior. I pray that we will throw ourselves on the grace and righteousness of Jesus Christ and truly be purified from the inside out. I pray that we will treat marriage as sacred. I pray that we will redeem our lust and redirect it as love for Jesus. And I pray that our purity will be a beacon of light in a sexually dark culture and that our lives will point people to Jesus so that God will get all the glory.