



The Sermon on the Mount Study  
**Bible Study Session 07**  
**Matthew 5:27-30 : Topic 07**

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**Greek NT**

5.27 Ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη, Οὐ μοιχεύσεις. 5.28 ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πᾶς ὁ βλέπων γυναῖκα πρὸς τὸ ἐπιθυμῆσαι αὐτήν ἤδη ἐμοίχευσεν αὐτήν ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτοῦ. 5.29 εἰ δὲ ὁ ὀφθαλμὸς σου ὁ δεξιὸς σκανδαλίζει σε, ἔξελε αὐτὸν καὶ βάλε ἀπὸ σοῦ· συμφέρει γάρ σοι ἵνα ἀποληται ἐν τῶν μελῶν σου καὶ μὴ ὅλον τὸ σῶμά σου βληθῆ εἰς γέενναν. 5.30 καὶ εἰ ἡ δεξιὰ σου χεὶρ σκανδαλίζει σε, ἔκκοψον αὐτήν καὶ βάλε ἀπὸ σοῦ· συμφέρει γάρ σοι ἵνα ἀποληται ἐν τῶν μελῶν σου καὶ μὴ ὅλον τὸ σῶμά σου εἰς γέενναν ἀπέλθῃ.

**Gute Nachricht Bibel**

27 »Ihr wisst, dass es heißt: ‘Du sollst nicht die Ehe brechen!’ 28 Ich aber sage euch: Wer die Frau eines anderen begehrt, hat in seinem Herzen schon die Ehe mit ihr gebrochen.

29 Wenn dich dein rechtes Auge zur Sünde verführt, dann reiß es aus und wirf es weg! Es ist besser für dich, du verlierst eines deiner Glieder, als dass du ganz in die Hölle geworfen wirst. 30 Und wenn dich deine rechte Hand zur Sünde verführt, dann hau sie ab und wirf sie weg! Es ist besser für dich, du verlierst eines deiner Glieder, als dass du ganz in die Hölle kommst.

**NRSV**

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 lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

**NLT**

27 “You have heard that the law of Moses says, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ 28 But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust in his eye has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 So if your eye – even if it is your good eye – causes you to lust, 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 hand – even if it is your stronger 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 be thrown into hell.

**The Study of the Text:<sup>1</sup>**

**1. What did the text mean to the first readers?**

The first ‘premise / antithesis’ pericope in 5:21-26 focused on prohibition of anger as an extension of the Old Testament law in the Kingdom of God as taught by Jesus. Mt. 5:27-30 moves to adultery with a similar extension of the Old Testament Law to cover attitude as well as action.

Some historical background on human sexual practices in the first century world are absolutely essential for correct understanding of what Jesus is getting at here in this passage. In this topic one has to consider Greek, Roman, and Jewish as separate traditions because they each took on distinctive patterns. Ironically, all three cultures placed great emphasis upon family, from differing perspectives. One could easily but falsely conclude from this that moral standards between husband and wife would then be relatively high in order to protect the integrity of the family. Such was not the case at all. Factor in the male dominating role into the family structure, and all kinds of perversions took on legitimacy within the standards of the ancient world.

Greek culture introduced into the ancient world homosexuality in the form of pederasty.<sup>2</sup> This became a significant part of their culture from the time of Homer in the eighth century BCE onward. Inside the Greek household, the wife - polygamy was extremely rare in the Mediterranean world of the New Testament -- was expected to remain sexually faithful to her husband, but the reverse was not true. Sexual infidelity by the woman normally brought about her execution. The wife had to complete sexually with eromenoi (adolescent boys), hetaeras (prostitutes) and slaves in their own homes for the affection of their husband. The male head

<sup>1</sup>Serious study of the biblical text must look at the ‘then’ meaning, i.e., the historical meaning, and the ‘now’ meaning, i.e., the contemporary application, of the scripture text. In considering the historical meaning, both elements of literary design and historical aspects must be considered. In each study we will attempt a summary overview of these procedures in the interpretation of the scripture text.

<sup>2</sup>“Greek pederasty, as idealised by the Greeks from archaic times onward, was a relationship and bond between an adult man and an adolescent boy outside his immediate family.” [“Pederasty in Ancient Greece,” Wikipedia online]

of the household had almost complete freedom to engage in sexual activities with women other than his wife. About the only boundary was another man's wife. Thus Greek culture produced a moral cesspool of immorality and perversion.

Roman society was impacted by Greek thinking, but developed its own distinctive pattern, as the below article summarizes:

The sexual atmosphere in the earlier stages of Roman civilization included celebrations associated with human reproductive organs. Over time there emerged institutionalization of voluntary sex as well as prostitution. This resulted in a virtual sexual caste system in Roman civilization – different grades and degrees of sexual relationships. Apart from the legally wedded spouses, a number of males used to have Delicuae, the kept mistresses of wealthy and prominent men. The next were the Famosae (literal meaning: soiled doves from respectable family), mostly the daughters and even wives of the wealthy families who enjoyed sex for its own sake. Then, there was another class known as Lupae, who were willing to have sexual union with anyone for a price. Copae (literal meaning: bar maids) were the serving girls in the taverns and inns and who did not mind being hired as bedmates for the night by travelers. Handsome adolescent menservants known as concubini would serve their master in bed, until they matured and fell into disfavor.

The ancient Jewish attitude differed significantly from both the Greek and Roman patterns. In theory, the Law of Moses defined the standards<sup>3</sup> that were then generally followed by the Jewish people. The standards were in place, but the adherence was rather spotty and selective.<sup>4</sup> Homosexuality, incest, and bestiality were soundly condemned, but prostitution was widely practiced among the Jews. Strict penalty was imposed on the wife for marital infidelity, but the husband in general was free to have sexual relations with other women beyond his wife, so long as it wasn't another man's wife.

Thus the sexual standards introduced by Jesus in our text and elsewhere in the New Testament were revolutionary and radical for that day. The heart of the teaching by Jesus and the apostles is to call the people of God back to the ideal set forth in Genesis 2:24: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh" (NRSV). This principle is the foundation for all of the teaching on human sexuality in the New Testament.

#### **Literary Aspects of our passage:**

##### ***Literary Form (Genre):***

The essential form here is that same as the other five premise / antithesis pericopes in 5:21-47. The core expression in verses 27-28 is the standard "you have heard it said...but I say to you." In the expansion elements found in verses 29-30 one encounters a highly creative use of hyperbole in order to make a dramatic point. This material came out of the oral tradition of Jesus' teaching and Matthew made use of it both here and in 18:8-9.<sup>5</sup> Mark also picked up this material and incorporated it into his narrative

<sup>3</sup>“The laws pertaining to sex are usually not concentrated in one portion of a biblical book. The various codes may repeat the same regulation (see LAW IN THE OT) on a number of subjects, including that of sex control.

Adulterous interest in another man's wife is prohibited (Exod. 20:14, 17; Lev. 18:20; 20:10; Deut. 22:22-29). The codes note further the seduction of a virgin (Exod. 22:16); treatment of a female captive taken as war booty (Deut. 21:11-14); incest (Lev. 18:6-18; 20:11-12, 14, 20; Deut. 27:20, 22); causing one's daughter to become a harlot (Lev. 19:29); intercourse with a betrothed slave (19:20), with a menstruating woman (15:24; 18:19; 20:18); menstruation (15:19-24); a woman's abnormal hemorrhage (15:25-30); the discharge of semen (15:16; 22:4). Also included are laws against homosexuality (18:22; 20:13); intercourse with a beast by members of either sex (18:23; 20:15-16); a woman's intervention in a quarrel between her husband and another man by seizing the latter's sex organ (Deut. 25:11); prohibition against the use of earnings from homosexual practices in the temple (23:18); laws in case of an amputated male sex organ (23:1), of crushed testicles (Lev. 21:20 [with respect to a priest]; Deut. 23:1); prohibition of cult PROSTITUTION among the sons and daughters of Israel (Deut. 23:17); and the treatment of a bastard (23:2).“ (O.J. Baab, "Sex, Sexual Behavior," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, iPreach)

<sup>4</sup>“Since sex is both a powerful physiological-psychological drive and a crucial aspect of the reproduction of populations, no society leaves the matter unregulated. Some societies take a very positive view of sex and are permissive, while others take a negative view and are restrictive. In general, societies of the Mediterranean area are of the second type. There is also a strong statistical correlation between restrictions on premarital sex, the placing of a high value on virginity in brides, the existence of a double standard, and the existence of prostitution.

The ancient Hebrews, however, do not fit neatly into this scheme; their attitude toward sex is ambivalent. On the one hand, they valued it and celebrated it joyously; on the other, they feared and depreciated it. And while they believed (Gen. 2:1) that the primordial relation between the sexes was one of complementarity between equals, they in fact practiced a marked double standard.” (C.R. Taber, "Sex, Sexual Behavior, no. 2", *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, iPreach)

<sup>5</sup>Mt. 18:7-9 (NRSV): “7 Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes! 8 If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire. 9 And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two

about Jesus; see Mk. 9:42-48.<sup>6</sup> Failure to recognize the literary device of hyperbole<sup>7</sup> here has occasioned some really weird interpretations of Jesus' words. The point made by Jesus is that drastic action needs to be taken to avoid adultery.

**Literary Context:**

This pericope is the second of a series of six antithesis found in the Sermon. Also it stands as the second of three antitheses in the first set of the two sets of three antitheses. Logically, it grows out of the idea of anger addressed in the first one in 5:21-26. More importantly, it will lay the foundation for the very abbreviated mentioning of divorce in the third set in 5:31-32.

**Literary Structure:**

The block diagram of the text becomes important for understanding the internal thought flow of the text. From the diagram below several observations can be made about the thought flow.

First comes the Premise declaration in statement 38 in 5:27. This text is a copying of the Greek Septuagint translation of both Exodus 20:14 and Deuteronomy 5:18. The is the sixth commandment of the Decalogue foundation for the Law of Moses found in these two passages.

This particular commandment forbid marital infidelity.

Second, Jesus contrastive statement in 5:28 (#39) extends this principle to the lustful eye from which the sinful action originates. In reality, this concept was already present in the OT Law in numerous places. In the Decalogue itself, one is forbidden from coveting 'his neighbor's wife' among other things in the last commandment. Jesus' emphasis heightens an implicit idea already in the Law. One probable point of true extension of the OT law is that the term 'woman' used by Jesus moves to cover any woman, and not just another married woman as the Old Testament Law prescribed.

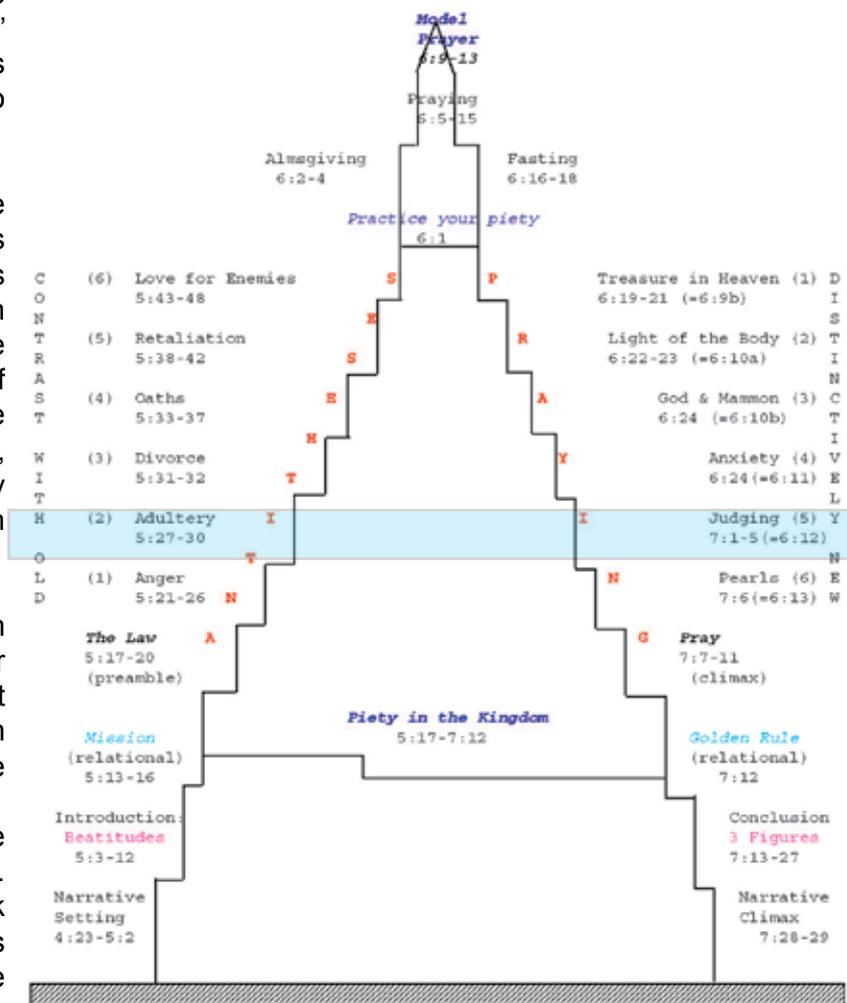
Third, the two expansion elements in vv. 29-30 express clearly signal hyperbole as a dramatic way of highlighting the very serious nature of Jesus' antithetical declaration. Important symbolism are present in the choice of the right eye and the right hand. The right side body parts were usually taken to be more important and more powerful than the left side elements in the ancient world. The eye in the first expansion picks up on the prohibition of lustful looking in verse 28. In ancient Judaism the right hand symbolized action and thus the right hand underscores the outward action of adultery forbidden by the eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire."

<sup>6</sup>Mk. 9:42-48 (NRSV): "42 "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. 43 If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. 44 [Verses 44 and 46 (which are identical with verse 48) are lacking in the best ancient authorities] 45 And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. 46, 47 And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, 48 where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched."

<sup>7</sup>Merriam-Webster definition of hyperbole: "extravagant exaggeration (as "mile-high ice-cream cones")"

**The Literary Structure of the Sermon on the Mount**

Matthew 4:23-7:29



Source: Leola L. Cranford, *Study Manual of the Sermon on the Mount: Greek Text* (Fort Worth: Scripta Publishing Inc., 1988), 320. Adapted from Gunter Bornkamm, "Der Aufbau der Bergpredigt," *New Testament Studies* 24 (1977-78): 419-432.

Old Testament code in verse 27.

Taken together the four declarations for an informal chiastic structure:

A (adultery act)

B (lustful eye)

B' (right eye)

A' (right hand)

The impact of this is to tightly pull together both the action and the inner attitude that leads to the action. Clearly Jesus does not set aside the Old Testament principle. Instead, he builds on it to extend its application to cover the inner attitude. Also, he extends the Law to include all women outside of one's own wife.

38 5:27 **You have heard,**  
that it was said,  
You shall not commit adultery.

39 5:28 **I say to you that**  
everyone looking at a woman with lust  
/-----|  
has already committed adul-  
tery  
with her  
in his heart.

40 5:29 **gouge it out,**  
and  
41 **cast it**  
from you;  
for  
42 **it is better for you**  
that one of your members perish  
than for  
your entire body to be cast  
into Hell.

43 5:30 **cut it off**  
and  
44 **cast it**  
from you  
for  
45 **it is better for you**  
that one of your members perish  
than for  
your entire body to perish  
in Hell.

### Exegesis of the Text:

**Adultery in Judaism (v. 27):** "You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery" (Ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη, Οὐ μοιχεύσεις).

In the strict sense of meaning the Old Testament text forbid a man from entering into sexual intimacy with a woman married to someone else. Adultery was a major problem in the Old Testament. It came under increasing condemnation by the prophets of the Old Testament. Also, it sometimes served to

symbolize the unfaithfulness of Israel to God as a way of stressing how much God despised the practice. The most infamous incident of adultery in the Old Testament is that of King David against the married woman Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11. God's punishment of David was severe and life-long.

**The Lustful Eye (v. 28):** "But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πᾶς ὁ βλέπων γυναῖκα πρὸς τὸ ἐπιθυμῆσαι αὐτήν ἤδη ἐμοίχευσεν αὐτήν ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτοῦ).

Jesus does two things in his contrastive statement. First, adultery is extended to include sexual actions with every woman outside his wife. Not just the married woman is in view; instead, every woman as the object of lustful desire is the target. In that world, such an idea was radical and put Christianity crossways with both Judaism and the Greco-Roman society. By such declaration, Jesus affirmed the value and worth of women as human beings created in the image of God, and not just objects of passion.

Second, he defines the guilt of adultery as extending to one's "heart." The heart was the place of decision making in the ancient world; not the place of emotions which were the 'guts' (σπλάγχνα; cf. Phil. 2:2). Thus guilt is incurred by the man when the look produces a willingness to engage in the wrong sinful action given the chance.

**Radical Remedies (vv. 29-20):** "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members 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 of your members than for your whole body to go into hell." (εἰ δὲ ὁ ὀφθαλμὸς σου ὁ δεξιὸς σκανδαλίζει σε, ἔξελε αὐτὸν καὶ βάλε ἀπὸ σοῦ· συμφέρει γάρ σοι ἵνα ἀπόληται ἓν τῶν μελῶν σου καὶ μὴ ὅλον τὸ σῶμά σου βληθῆ εἰς γέενναν. 5.30 καὶ εἰ ἡ δεξιὰ σου χεὶρ σκανδαλίζει σε, ἔκκοψον αὐτήν καὶ βάλε ἀπὸ σοῦ· συμφέρει γάρ σοι ἵνα ἀπόληται ἓν τῶν μελῶν σου καὶ μὴ ὅλον τὸ σῶμά σου εἰς γέενναν ἀπέλθῃ).

Simple logic uncovers signals of the point made by Jesus. Gouging out one's right eye or cutting off one's right hand would do nothing to stem the urge toward adultery humanly speaking. Clearly Jesus' point goes beyond a literal meaning. Hyperbole is an effective literary device to make a point dramatically more powerful than simple declaration could. What Jesus is getting at becomes clear from both the symbolism of the eye and hand in ancient Jewish tradition, as well as from recognition of the chiasmic structure of the passage as charted above.

Jesus considered sexual activity outside marriage to be a grievous sin and to have serious negative consequences. The warning in both these extension elements is for suffering damnation in Hell. Although modern society has almost degenerated to the moral cesspool of the ancient world here, Christians are called upon to follow a radically different standard.

Biblical understanding of human sexuality is important.

The basis of the biblical view of human sexual activity is a positive view of sex within committed heterosexual marriage, i.e., within a relationship in which procreation is an aim and in which children can be received as a blessing and nurtured. This is evident in the accounts of the creation of mankind as sexual, in the views of marriage and children revealed in narratives, and in the accounts of and regulations concerning sexual sins. The intimacy of sex is acknowledged, however — most immediately by the use of *Heb. yāda*: "know" for sexual intercourse (e.g., Gen. 4:1; 1 Kgs. 1:4). That human sexuality is ultimately a mystery beyond human understanding is also acknowledged (Prov. 30:18–19). (Allen Myers, *The Erdmans Bible Dictionary*, 928).

## 2. What does the text mean to us today?

1) What is your understanding of human sexuality?

2) Has this study changed that understanding?