

LOOKIN' GOOD!
Matthew 5:27 - 30

INTRODUCTION:

"The sexton stood in the porch of Milford meeting-house, pulling busily at the bell-rope. The old people of the village came stooping along the street. Children, with bright faces, tripped merrily beside their parents, or mimicked a graver gait, in the conscious dignity of their Sunday clothes. Spruce bachelors looked sidelong at the pretty maidens, and fancied that the Sabbath sunshine made them prettier than on week days. When the throng had mostly streamed into the porch, the sexton began to toll the bell, keeping his eye on the Reverend Mr. Hooper's door. The first glimpse of the clergyman's figure was the signal for the bell to cease its summons.

"But what has good Parson Hooper got upon his face?" cried the sexton in astonishment.

"All within hearing immediately turned about, and beheld the semblance of Mr. Hooper, pacing slowly his meditative way towards the meeting-house. With one accord they started, expressing more wonder than if some strange minister were coming to dust the cushions of Mr. Hooper's pulpit.

"Are you sure it is our parson?" inquired Goodman Gray of the sexton.

"Of a certainty it is good Mr. Hooper," replied the sexton. 'He was to have exchanged pulpits with Parson Shute, of Westbury; but Parson Shute sent to excuse himself yesterday, being to preach a funeral sermon.'

"The cause of so much amazement may appear sufficiently slight. Mr. Hooper, a gentlemanly person, of about thirty, though still a bachelor, was dressed with due clerical neatness, as if a careful wife had starched his band, and brushed the weekly dust from his Sunday's garb. There was but one thing remarkable in his appearance. Swathed about his forehead, and hanging down over his face, so low as to be shaken by his breath, Mr. Hooper had on a black veil. On a nearer view it seemed to consist of two folds of crape, which entirely concealed his features, except the mouth and chin, but probably did not intercept his sight, further than to give a darkened aspect to all living and inanimate things. With this gloomy shade before him, good Mr. Hooper walked onward, at a slow and quiet pace, stooping somewhat, and looking on the ground, as is customary with abstracted men, yet nodding kindly to those of his parishioners who still waited on the meeting-house steps. But so wonder-struck were they that his greeting hardly met with a return."

Thus begins "The Minister's Black Veil", a short story by Nathaniel Hawthorne. The Reverend Mr. Hooper, a Puritan preacher in New

England, suddenly and without explanation, starts wearing a black veil over his face. When his fiancée presses to know why, he merely states, "This veil is a type and a symbol".

To his dying day, the Reverend Hooper refuses to remove his veil. In fact, those surrounding his deathbed beg him to at least remove the veil before he passes into eternity; but he refuses.

Then, with his last breath, Mr. Hooper says:

"Why do you tremble at me alone?" cried he, turning his veiled face round the circle of pale spectators. 'Tremble also at each other! Have men avoided me, and women shown no pity, and children screamed and fled, only for my black veil? What, but the mystery which it obscurely typifies, has made this piece of crape so awful? When the friend shows his inmost heart to his friend; the lover to his best beloved; when man does not vainly shrink from the eye of his Creator, loathsomely treasuring up the secret of his sin; then deem me a monster, for the symbol beneath which I have lived, and die! I look around me, and, lo! on every visage a Black Veil!"

You see, church, we each hide behind a black veil because we will not be open and honest with each other. For today, at least, let's pull aside our veils and admit that we are all sinners. And some of us are adulterers and adulteresses, of heart if not of body. Then, having confessed that, let's ask the help that Jesus offered to deal with the problem at its roots.

Will you please pray with me?

God of glory and Lord of love: we come to You at this time and in this place to ask You to help us to remove the veil of secrecy from our faces. If we cannot be totally open and honest with one another, will You please help us to be honest with You? To help us be honest with You, oh Lord, will You please help us to be honest with ourselves. Sometimes, the self is the easiest person to deceive and the most difficult person to whom to tell the truth. Today, we want to tell ourselves the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help us God. And I pray this in the name of Jesus, who is the truth: A-men.

This morning, let's begin by considering:

I. **The Problem of Sexual Immorality**

Scripture speaks of **The Forbidden Act**; that is, the sexual activity that God prohibits. In fact, the Bible uses 12 different terms to specify the sexual activities that God prohibits. And they are very specific.

While I could go through each of those terms, one by one, to tell you in detail what sexual activity God forbids, it would be much easier and much clearer if I simply put it like this:

God does not allow people to engage in any sexual activity other than with the person of the opposite gender to whom they are married. Period. End of sentence. No sexual activity of any kind with boyfriends or girlfriends. None with someone else's husband or wife. Not with anyone of your same sex. Not with any other relatives. Not with animals, vegetables or minerals. If you are a married person, there is one person with whom you may engage in sexual activity and only one on the face of the planet. And if you are not married, you have one less than that.

Now didn't you already know that? And doesn't that seem perfectly clear? But it is amazing how we can try to obscure the obvious. People will ask questions or make interpretations to try to legitimize the illegitimate and to try to excuse the inexcusable. The famous hedge, "*It depends of what the meaning of 'is' is*" has become a part of our national memory...and our national shame.

But it is not just the high-profile sinners who try to excuse their illicit activity. A number of years ago, a man told me that the King James word "adultery", in the Hebrew language, really meant to adulterate wheat by mixing weed seed into the grain. So, this man said, what is forbidden is unfair business practice, not sexual immorality. But when I asked him, he didn't even know the Hebrew alphabet, didn't know the Hebrew word that was translated "adultery" and didn't know where he had read or heard that convoluted explanation. I'm guessing he made it up.

No, don't let anybody confuse you. The Bible is very simple and very clear on this subject: any sexual activity with anyone other than your spouse is sin.

But that isn't always easy to obey. And it isn't always what we want to obey. So while the Old Testament dealt with the forbidden act, Jesus made it easier to obey by addressing **The Forbidden Thought**. Jesus said:

²⁷ "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' 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 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. 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 part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

Whoa, Darrel! You said that makes it easier? That makes it more difficult. Moses said, "Do not commit adultery" but Jesus said, "Don't even lust." I may be able to control my actions but I can't control my thoughts.

But Jesus says you *can* control your thoughts. You may not be able to help the fact that you see a handsome man or a beautiful woman and you notice their beauty. And Jesus is not forbidding that. What he is forbidding is anyone looking at a woman “lustfully”. The Greek phrase is *προς επιθυμησησαι*. The word *προς*, when used with an infinitive, most often means “for the purpose of”. Literally, Jesus is warning that a man who looks at a woman “for the purpose of” desiring her or longing for her, has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

The forbidden thought is the choice to deliberately excite desires that cannot be legitimately fulfilled. Jesus was telling us that it is easier to prevent adultery if we do not deliberately excite the desire to sin in the first place.

So, how do we deal with this in practical terms?

II. THE PREVENTION OF SEXUAL IMMORALITY

A. What NOT to do:

1. First of all, do not promise not to think about sin. The more you try not to think about something...anything...the more that is on your mind. For instance, do not think about the noisemakers and Silly String I used in last week’s sermon. Seriously. I mean it! Don’t think about them. It’s hard, isn’t it? It’s hard to not think about something you’ve been told not to think about.
2. Second, do not try to deny that you are tempted. No problem was ever resolved just by refusing to acknowledge that it is a problem.
3. Do not try to escape from the problem. In a sense, that was what the medieval monks tried to do. They thought if they could cloister themselves from every temptation, they would be pure in thought and pure in deed. But they were not. History records the life of St. Anthony who lived like a hermit, alone in the desert for 35 years, and yet he said he was tortured by lustful thoughts. If he couldn’t escape lust by hiding, you can’t either.
4. Fourth, DO NOT try to fight the lust of the flesh in the power of the flesh. You cannot, through human effort, overcome lust.
5. But by the same token, do not surrender to the temptation. You do not have to sin. Sadly, too many people assume they are going to fail anyway so the figure, “Why not just give in now and get it over with?” Do not give up, give in, give over and surrender to the temptation.

B. So, if those are things not to do, then that begs the question of what TO do:

1. Remove that which leads us into temptation. Note what Jesus said in Matthew 5:29-30.

²⁹ 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. 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 part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

I will tell you that I suspect this may have been an example of hyperbole or overstatement for effect. I doubt that Jesus really meant that people were to gouge out an eye and cut off a hand to prevent lust and adultery. One-eyed, one-armed men can still sin. The problem is in the mind.

No, I suspect his point was that we are to remove that which leads us into temptation.

- If certain books cause you to be tempted to sin, don't read them.
- If certain television programs cause you to be tempted to sin, don't watch them.
- If certain movies cause you to be tempted, don't rent them.
- If certain internet sites cause you to be tempted to sin, don't visit them.

I've known people who have had to take the drastic action of getting rid of their television and their internet service so they could avoid the temptation. And Jesus' point is that it is better to go to heaven without having seen every TV show, movie or internet site, than it is to go to hell with a mind full of books, movies, television shows and internet images.

We are to remove that which leads us into temptation.

2. We are to fill our minds with the things of the Lord. The easiest way to get all the air out of a glass is to fill it with water. And the easiest way to get impure thoughts out of our minds is to fill them with pure thoughts.

At the end of the book of Philippians, Paul wrote:

Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

That is certainly a positive step we can each take to conquer the demon of lust.

3. And, fill your life with the activities of the Lord. Clear back in 1386, in his "Tale of Melibee", Chaucer wrote. "Idle hands are the devil's workshop." As we fill our lives with the activities of the Lord, we have less time to be involved in the work of Satan.

CONCLUSION:

People, the Creator who formed us and knows us best would not demand of us something that we cannot do.

The Christ who died on the cross to free us from sin would not lay upon us a burden which we cannot carry, only to condemn us for laying it down.

What Scripture requires of us, we can do. We can think pure thoughts. We can live pure lives. But we must follow the prescription of the Great Physician if we would experience his cure.

INVITATION:

#561 – "I Would Be Like Jesus"