

“The Eyes Have It”
Matthew 5:17-37
Series: In Not Of Week 2. Relate Deeply
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Men and women are different especially when it comes to romance. A few days before their anniversary a husband and wife are shopping. After a time the wife realizes her husband is not with her and she becomes worried. Reaching him by cell phone she asks, “Where are you?” He replies, “Oh honey, you caught me. Remember that jewelry store where you saw that diamond necklace you loved and I told you at the time I just couldn’t afford it but one day I would get it for you?” The wife becomes misty-eyed and says, “Yes my darling. I remember that store.” “Well,” he said, “I’m at the Home Depot next to it.”

Relationships. They are the heart of who you are. We often define ourselves in terms of our relationships – I am a son, brother, husband, father, grandfather, pastor, friend. The temperature of a relationship can control your mood. If it’s warm, cold, frigid, fiery, sunny, rocky, blissful or broken it will affect how you feel.

In our series IN NOT OF, Jesus gives us some challenging words on how to improve our relationships. He tells us to Relate Deeply. His overall direction is: if we want to lift our relationships higher we have to go deeper. Instead of looking at surface problems and solutions, we need to dig deeper into the causes which rock our relationships. In Matthew 5:17-48 Jesus addresses six code red relationship scenarios:

Matthew 5:21-26 Anger
Matthew 5:27-30 Lust
Matthew 5:31-32 Divorce
Matthew 5:33-37 False Promises
Matthew 5:38-42 Revenge
Matthew 5:43-48 Enemies

I asked if anyone else on the message team wanted to preach this passage. As you can see I lost. Today we look at the first four. Before all six is a preface which can be confusing:

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. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For 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

Most Christians read these words and conclude, “If those are the requirements for entry into heaven I better start preparing for my highway to...” No one can practice and obey all

the commandments. Many Christians do not follow the Kosher laws, observe the Sabbath on Saturday or perform animal sacrifices. So how do we follow Jesus' commands?

These verses explain Jesus' Relationship to the Law and the Prophets – what we call the Old Testament. This the only Bible Jesus had. In the First Century there were several schools of thought among the Jewish people just as there are various denominations of Jews today. And like today, they spanned the spectrum from liberal to conservative. In fact, they accuse Jesus of being too soft, of “setting aside” some commandments. His critics complain when He heals on the Sabbath, His disciples don't fast or perform ritual handwashing, they have close contact with sinners and tax collectors. They say He is not interpreting the Law but abolishing or destroying the Law.

So Jesus responds to His critics. Like all Jews in His day, Jesus considers Scripture to be the very Word of God right down to the last pen stroke. He did not come to abolish the Law and Prophets but to *fulfill* them. This has three dimensions.

1. Our failure to perfectly keep the Law, because of our sin, drives us to Jesus. The Law makes us see our sin and seek His help.
2. Jesus fulfills the requirements of the Law for us through His death and resurrection. He makes us righteous and sinless in God's eyes by His grace.
3. Now, as children of our Heavenly Father, we work to keep God's Law, in gratitude for all He does for us through Jesus.

This is the only way our righteousness can surpass the Pharisees. When Jesus interprets the Law, He does not go to the right or the left. He goes higher and deeper. He lifts us higher to the Father by showing us the deeper meaning of the Law and our sin.

And one more thing: prepare for Jesus to speak some shocking things. He will say you are going to hell if you call someone an idiot, tell you to gouge out your eye, chop off your hand, and sell everything you have. This is a teaching techniques to get our attention. Some follow these words literally. I think Jesus is speaking figuratively yet seriously and deeply. He calls for a radical response but not a violent one. It is important we keep this in mind so we don't turn Jesus words into new laws and rules for relationships.

Jesus' first relationship recommendation is about **Anger – Lose the Labels**

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, “You fool!” will be in danger of the fire of hell. Matthew 5:21-22

How can name-calling be the same as murder or send you to the fiery place? Jesus reveals every act of aggression, destruction and ethnic cleansing begins with labeling and name-calling. In his book, *Less Than Human*, Professor David Livingstone Smith states all violence starts with one crucial ingredient—the dehumanization of the victims.

Thinking about your enemies in subhuman categories is a way of creating mental distance, of excluding them from the human family. It makes murder not just permissive but obligatory. We should kill vermin or predators. American settlers called Native Americans savage beasts. The Nazis depicted Jewish people as “rats.” The Japanese invaders of China called their victims “chancorro,” which means a bug or animal. When we slap a dehumanizing label on people, it's much easier to strip them of their dignity and destroy them.²

Murder, war, or character assassination all begin in the mind as a label, an insult, a slur. It has to. Before I can steal, kill or destroy you I have to take away your humanity. I have to make you less than human: a them, an object, an it. Labels allow me to do this. It's so easy for our minds to slap a self-adhesive name on those we don't like, those who don't like me, look like me, act like me, think like me, believe like me. We can make snap judgments faster than we can snap chat. Our name-calling might not lead to violence, but it still can do great damage. If you grow up hearing, “You're stupid” it's hard to shake.

Instead of labeling, Jesus tells us to let reconcile. He even says forgiveness and reconciliation are a higher priority than going to church:

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift. Matthew 5:23-24

Forgiveness and reconciliation are more important to God than worship and offerings. So if I don't see you in worship on Sunday it better be because you are out forgiving someone. I can't have a close relationship with my Father in heaven if I refuse to forgive someone here on earth. So lose the labels and let them off the hook.

Next Relationship recommendation is **Lust – Look Away.**

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

Notice: there is no physical contact. It's just a look. The eyes have it. The eyes, driven by emotional desire, reach out and snatch the image of a person and pull it in. What's wrong with a look? Lust feeds on that image. It uses the person as an object. The more the eyes have, the more the eyes want. The more the eyes want the more the eyes need until, as Jesus says, it causes you to stumble. The Greek word for “stumble” is skandalizo or, in English, scandal. Emotional adultery can and does lead to physical adultery. Yet the stumble and scandal of adultery, according to Jesus, happens within long before it happens without. This is so serious Jesus adds,

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. 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. Matthew 5:29-30

Wow. That sounds extreme. If we take that literally there would be a lot of one-eyed lefties. Jesus is clearly exaggerating to make a point. If you let lust in through your eyes or your hands you create hell for yourself, your family and others. What is hell? It is pain and sorrow and separation from God.

This is **Spiritual Adultery** - the core sin in the Bible. It's loving an idol instead of God. Spiritual adultery is wandering away from God. Spiritual adultery happens when we let anything on earth – possessions, positions, pleasures, power, popularity - take God's place in our hearts. We must be filled with God instead of stuff, love God first instead of idols. God is love. He wants to love you with the love you've been looking for.

The Lord created you for passion. There are two opposite errors people make about passion. One is to assume sex is wrong, shameful or dirty. The Church preached this message in the past. The other extreme, current in our time, says sex is a natural hunger like eating or sleeping. It needs to be satisfied whenever and with whomever you want, so long as nobody gets hurt.

The truth is a lot of people are getting hurt. Our culture is saturated with sex. It's pouring into our homes through internet pornography. This week the Barna organization released a study called Beyond the Porn Phenomenon:

Top 3 porn sites in the US receive more web traffic annually than Netflix, Amazon, Pinterest, LinkedIn and Tiktok combined.

61% of US adults report using porn

75% of Christian men and 40% of Christian women view porn at least occasionally.

82% of Christians with a history of porn use say they have no one helping them avoid pornography.

9% of Churches have a program to help their people recover from porn use.

Pornography use is similar to a chemical addiction. Dr. Jeffrey Satinover says, Modern science allows us to understand that the underlying nature of an addiction to pornography is chemically nearly identical to a heroin addiction.

We need to especially take action to protect the rising generation which is exposed to this at a much younger age than ever before. The U.S. Justice Department states,

Never before in the history of telecommunications media in the United States has so much indecent (and obscene) material been so easily accessible by so many minors in so many American homes with so few restrictions.

The Church must be a place of healing and deliverance not judgment and rejection. Passion and sex are God's creation. They are good gifts He gave us. But like all God's gifts, we have broken them. How can we recapture God's original plan for passion?

No matter what's in your past, Jesus gave His life to purify you and make you holy and blameless in God's eyes. Let's protect our children and youth. The website www.covenanteyes.com provides tools to filter and monitor your children's internet use. It offers helpful articles on the problem of porn and how to protect your family. If you are struggling with lust, inside or outside of marriage, break the silence and seek help. I will listen confidentially, with grace, without judgment and, if needed, direct you to a counselor or support group. Don't suffer in the prison of silence and fear. God wants to set you free.

Jesus' third Relationship Recommendation is **Promises – Live What You Say**.

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 sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery

Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.' But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all...All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one. Matthew 5:31-34, 37

This could cover another whole sermon so let me say briefly I do not believe Jesus is unconditionally opposed to divorce. He seems more concerned that husbands, on a whim, could turn out their wives with a simple piece of parchment. In ancient societies women were vulnerable and became victims without a husband's protection. If you add the following teaching about oaths, Jesus tells us to make serious promises and take our promises seriously. This includes the vows we make in marriage as well as the contracts we make in business or the promises we make to our children. We must work to remove everything which breaks our promises: Lack of communication, Issues from the past, Lack of trust, Attraction to porn or to people outside the marriage, Too much work, Anger, Alcohol or Drugs. We also need to add practices such as listening, tenderness, kindness, making time and communicating your needs and desires.

Here are some action steps to help you relate more deeply this week:

- Learn about the background or culture of someone who is different than you.
- Avoid using coarse or insulting words. Don't look at others as objects.
- Challenge labels and snap judgments that pop up in your mind.
- Don't watch shows, movies or websites which are R, MA and beyond.
- If you struggle with anger, lust or breaking sacred promises ask a friend to help you.
- Take positive steps to strengthen and deepen your family relationships.

Eugene Peterson shares a story about a completely unchurched young woman who discovered true passion. She started attending his church and made a genuine commitment to follow Jesus. Eventually she asked to be baptized and started studying Scripture, and attending worship—"embracing everything readily and gladly." But one thing puzzled Peterson: the young woman continued to live with her boyfriend (as she had done for years), and she was uninterested in marriage.

She told me all this without apology and not as a confession but quite casually, as we were getting acquainted with one another. I wondered if I should say anything. Surely she knew that the Christian way had some sexual implications for the way you lived. She was in church each Sunday I assumed that she would eventually notice. I waited for her to bring up the subject.

One day on impulse I said, "We have been having these conversations for seven months. Astrid, would you do something for me?" "Sure. What is it?" "Live celibate for the next six months." Surprised, she said, "Why would I do that?" "Trust me. I think it's important."

I learned later that her boyfriend moved out before the week was over. She said: "When you asked me to live celibate for six months, I had no idea what you were up to. You asked me to trust you, and so I did. It's been two months now, and I think I understand what you were doing. I feel so free; I've never felt so 'myself' before, never felt so at home with myself. I thought everybody did what I was doing—all my friends did. I just thought this was the American way. And now I am noticing so many other things about my relations with others—they seem so much more clean and whole. So uncluttered. And do you know what? I have been thinking that I might want to get married someday. Thank you."

The celibacy decision survived the six-month mark and continued for two more years, at which time she and her fiancé exchanged vows, and I blessed their Christian marriage.¹

Let God fill you with his passionate love and set you free.

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Practice Resurrection* (Eerdmans, 2010), pp. 195-196