



**Sermon Based Small Group  
Leader Discussion Guide**

**Sermon Title: “Defeating Sin’s Stronghold”**

**Sermon by Pastor Tom Harrington  
Week of February 20, 2011**

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<p><b>Session Objectives (Group Leader)</b></p>	<p><b>By the end of the session, group members should be able to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify sin’s stronghold: our fallen human nature.</li> <li>• Understand the connection between thoughts, desire, and behavior.</li> <li>• Identify at least one way to guard their hearts.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Personal Connection (Group Leader)</b></p>	<p><b>How does my story connect to the reading?</b> To prepare to lead this Bible study:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explore ministries addressing the problem of cultivated lust. (Cultivated lust means choosing to deliberately think about and dwell upon things that incite forbidden sexual desire and/or activity.) For example, a group called Triple X Church (XXX Church) promotes a “Porn Sunday” each year during Super Bowl weekend.</li> <li>• Reflect on your own experience with sexual and other temptations.</li> <li>• Pray for each member of your group by name.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Icebreaker</b></p>	<p>Have you ever visited a fort or castle? If so, where were you and what did you see? What features characterize such structures?</p> <p><b>LEADER’S NOTE: Forts and castles are ‘strongholds.’ This study aims to help your group members deal with sin’s stronghold – our fallen human nature. Only when we’re made NEW from the inside out will we overcome the devastating effects of misguided desire that leads to sin.</b></p>
<p><b>Big Idea</b></p>	<p>God intends for us to have victory over sin.</p>

**Sermon Text**

Matthew 5:27-30 (New International Version)

*27 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall 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 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.*

### Learning more about the lesson

Many people read the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) as a set of laws, but it is not. Rather, the Sermon on the Mount gives us illustrations of what life is like for those who are alive in the Kingdom of God. For example, such people are learning to live without being dominated by anger (Matthew 5:21-22) and cultivated lust (our text). They are learning to walk in the commandments of Christ naturally and easily.

Coveting a neighbor's wife was forbidden by the tenth commandment (Exodus 20:17). The rabbis (Jewish religious leaders) of Jesus' day generally taught that a man's good intentions are reckoned to him as good deeds, while his evil intentions are counted only if he gives in to them. In contrast, Jesus considers that the desire is as culpable as the act. Not only the physical deed, but the intention of the heart as well makes one guilty before God. This insight is the key to understanding the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus flatly states that an approach to righteousness that focuses on outward behavior, such as the one endorsed by the Pharisees and teachers of the law, is insufficient to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20).

1. Is it realistic to think that people are able to live in the way described in the Sermon on the Mount? Why or why not?

**LEADER'S NOTE: Consider using these as follow up questions: Can people really do these things in their present condition? If so, how? If not, what change makes it possible for a person to live in the Kingdom of God? This is a big topic, but here's a short answer: You must abandon all hope that your own efforts can win God's favor, admit your spiritual bankruptcy, and depend on grace alone for eternal salvation and daily living. Paul says "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). As a disciple of Jesus you learn to die to self and live your life as Jesus would live it if he were you.**

In verses 29-30 there occur two of the most startling sentences in the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). "Jesus carries impurity back beyond the adulterous act to the first touch of the hand and the first look of the eye, and back beyond these to the first inception of desire" (Interpreter's Bible, *Matthew*, p. 297). Then he graphically prescribes drastic measures to avoid total annihilation.

2. How does the focus on 'the first inception of desire' set up a confrontation with sin's stronghold?

**Leader Note: Focusing on "the first inception of sin" helps us trace sin back to its root, thus we can identify the source of the problem in our heart, take seriously all subsequent actions and thought stemming from that root, and safeguard ourselves from the temptation.**

Consider James 1:13-15: <sup>13</sup> *When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone;* <sup>14</sup> *but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.* <sup>15</sup> *Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.*

3. Do you agree that human eyes and hands are capable of receiving and sending powerful messages? How does the person consumed by cultivated lust misuse these powerful abilities? Consider how your actions might have inadvertently sent the wrong message and tempted another.

Jesus did not teach that human desire is sinful. However, we are to master our desires rather than having them master us. The purpose of this self-discipline, possible by God's grace, is abundant life. Just as the gardener knows that pruning is for the sake of fruit, the Christian prunes back unbridled desire in order that God's good fruit might grow.

Regarding 'gouge it out' (v. 29) and 'cut it off' (v. 30) Bob Geulich writes: "Self-mutilation does not help one to avoid sin anymore than outlawing lust as adultery. The issue goes much deeper. It involves our very person which our thoughts and actions represent. Therefore, this section underscores the need for completely new relationships between individuals in which evil no longer is the dominant given" (*The Sermon on the Mount*, p. 197).

4. Do you agree that our thoughts and actions represent the person we truly are? Why or why not?

**Leader Note: Consider using these follow up questions: Do our laws and codes of behavior reflect the fact that evil is "the dominant given?" If evil were not assumed to be "the dominant given," what kinds of relationship between individuals are possible?**

The church is called to be a sign and agent of the kingdom of God in which relationships between individuals are marked by love, mutual respect, and selfless service. *"Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, <sup>2</sup> then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, <sup>4</sup> not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others."* Philippians 2:1-4.

	5. In your experience, does the church help people learn to live in the reality of the Kingdom of God? If so, how?
<b>Taking it Home</b>	<p><b>How will I live it? Apply it?</b></p> <p>Proverbs 4:23 says, <i>“Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.”</i> What does this mean in practice? In light of your group’s study and discussion tonight, what specific things might you do (or not do) to guard your heart?</p> <p>Of the things mentioned in response to this question, which one or two things seem especially significant for your personal application at this time in your life? Write them down in the space below.</p>
<b>Looking Ahead</b>	<p><b>How can I prepare for the next Small Group meeting?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invite your group members to attend “Community,” 9:00-10:00 Sundays in the fellowship hall.</li> <li>• The text for next week is Matthew 5:38-48. The theme is “An Alternative to Revenge.”</li> </ul>
<b>Prayer Focus</b>	<p><b>How can I connect with God and others through prayer?</b> Pray honestly, asking God to help you trust his grace alone for eternal salvation and daily living.</p> <p><b>Leader Note: Confronted with Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, some of your group members may wonder, as did the astonished disciples of old, “Then who can be saved?!” (Matthew 19:25). Invite the group members to pray honestly, asking God to help them trust his grace alone for eternal salvation and daily living. If group members made specific commitments to guard their hearts, pray for them. As the leader, pray specifically for all those in and beyond your group who are struggling specifically with cultivated lust.</b></p>
<b>Updates</b>	<p><b>Announcements from:</b> Care Coordinator Outreach Coordinator, Social Coordinator</p>