

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

Sermon by Rev. Tom Harrington  
Week of February 20, 2011

### Sermon Based Small Group Discussion Guide

#### *Icebreaker*

**Big Idea:** God intends for us to have victory over sin.

#### **Sermon Text:**

<sup>27</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’

<sup>28</sup> But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> 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 5:27-30

#### **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 lusting (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?

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?

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 lusting 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?

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?

### **Taking it Home**

Proverbs 4:23 says, *"Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it."* 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?

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.

### **Prayer Requests and Praises:**

Pray honestly, asking God to help you trust his grace alone for eternal salvation and daily living.