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MINISTRIES

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Looking With Lustful Intent (Matthew 5:27-30)

If a man looks at a woman with “lust,” has he essentially committed adultery? In other words, if he sees a woman that he finds attractive and experiences sexual desire for her, has he already sinned? In Matthew 5:27-30, Jesus—or Yeshua, as he is called in Hebrew—says something that may suggest that to be the case:

Matthew 5:27-28

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

From here, Yeshua famously goes on to say that if your eye or hand causes you to sin, it is better to remove it, as losing one part of your body is preferable to having your entire body thrown into hell.

On the surface, this passage poses a dilemma. Human beings are created with a natural desire for sexual intimacy, which is essential for reproduction. And acting on this desire is good! In fact, God explicitly encouraged people to act on this desire when he commanded, “*Be fruitful and multiply*” (Genesis 1:28). God gave us the desire for sexual intimacy just as he gave us the desire for food. It’s part of being human.

However, satisfying this natural desire in the wrong way is sinful. For instance, as Yeshua himself points out, God also commanded, “*You shall not commit adultery*” (Exodus 20:14). If you break a marriage covenant in order to satisfy your sexual desire, that is obviously wrong. So then, what is Yeshua saying in this passage when he says that the one who looks at a woman with lustful intent *has already* committed adultery in his heart? Is he saying that a man commits a sin *tantamount to adultery* when he merely looks at a woman and experiences sexual desire for her? If so, wouldn’t that make it impossible to obey Yeshua’s teachings?

Some interpreters say yes. They argue that this is exactly what Yeshua means when he condemns looking at a woman with lustful intent and that it is indeed impossible. This passage is often cited as proof that Yeshua was “raising the bar” of Torah observance to an impossible standard in his Sermon on the Mount. The idea is that Yeshua did not actually expect his followers to adhere to his teachings, but

instead he sought to make Torah observance unattainable, highlighting humanity's inability to meet God's standard so that we recognize our need for grace. Here is Christian author Andrew Farley making this common argument:

Jesus drives nails in the coffin of anyone who thinks they can keep the Law. He begins with a revolutionary announcement: He has not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. He then proceeds to lay out, in excruciating and painful detail, the true and *impossible* standard of the Law...A quick examination of the standard shows just how impossible it is to reach: Anger equals murder? Looking with lust equals adultery? ... This is "the Lord with a sword," telling them to sever body parts or suffer the fiery consequences ... Think about it: How will they recognize their need for Him unless He first reveals their senseless attempts at Law-based living?

—Andrew Farley, *The Grace Message: Is the Gospel really this good?* (New York: Regnery Publishing, 2022), 103-104

As we can see, Farley argues that the purpose of Yeshua's Sermon on the Mount, including his teaching on lust, was not for his followers to obey it. Instead, it was to demonstrate that his followers *could not* obey it and should not even try. He goes on to say precisely that:

Jesus's plan was to purposefully bury His hearers under the condemnation of the Law, so they could see no way out apart from God's grace. For you as a believer, it's as if Jesus Christ skied down Mount Sinai, earned a gold medal, hung it around your neck, and said, "Stay off that mountain. It'll kill you." The Law kills, but Jesus fulfilled the Law so you wouldn't even have to try.

— Andrew Farley, *The Grace Message: Is the Gospel really this good?* (New York: Regnery Publishing, 2022), 112

Now, it is true that we all sin and are in need of God's grace. None of us are perfectly obedient in this life. But Farley's approach to this passage is completely wrong. It is *not* true that Yeshua was giving some impossible standard in his Sermon on the Mount. He really did expect his followers—those who have already received God's grace, by definition—to obey the Torah's commandments (Matthew 5:19). It is evident that Yeshua expects his listeners to follow his other teachings in the sermon, such as avoiding hypocrisy (Matthew 6:1-18), trusting God's provision (Matthew 6:25-34), and treating others as one wishes to be treated (Matthew 7:12). Thus, it stands to reason that Yeshua really did expect his followers not to look at a woman "with lustful intent."

But *how* is that possible? Well, to answer that question, we must look closer at this passage to understand what Yeshua meant by "lustful intent."

Lustful Intent

When Yeshua speaks about looking at a woman with lustful intent, often it is assumed that he is introducing a new commandment. However, this prohibition against "lust" comes straight out of the Torah, specifically the Tenth Commandment:

Exodus 20:17

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; **you shall not covet your neighbor's wife**, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.

In Greek, the word translated as “lust” (ἐπιθυμέω) in Matthew 5:28 is the same word used for “covet” in the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the *Tanakh* or Old Testament. Moreover, the Greek word for “wife” (γύνῃ) in Exodus 20:17 is the same word translated as “woman” in Matthew 5:28. So, when Yeshua speaks against “looking at a woman with lustful intent,” he is speaking against coveting. He is echoing the Tenth Commandment. As New Testament scholar Jason Staples writes:

Jesus isn’t saying anything new at all in Matthew 5:27-28. Instead, he directly cites one of the Ten Commands to remind his audience that the Law not only prohibits adultery, it prohibits coveting with the same severity. This is not an intensification of the Law; it’s a reminder of what the Law already says. In addition, Jesus gives no indication that he regards the Law as too difficult to keep—he not only assumes that his followers *can* follow his interpretation of the Torah but commands them to do so.

—Jason A. Staples, “Whoever Looks at a Woman With Lust: Misinterpreted Bible Passages #1”
August 20, 2009, jasonstaples.com

In Matthew 5:28, Yeshua is simply agreeing with the Torah that one should not covet his neighbor’s wife. So, if we want to understand what Yeshua means when he prohibits looking with lustful intent, we must seek to understand what the Torah means when it prohibits “coveting.”

What is Coveting?

What does the Torah mean when it says, “You shall not covet”? Well, the Hebrew word translated “covet” in Exodus 20:17 is חָמַד (hamad), and it is used in both positive and negative contexts. Let’s look at a couple of places where this word is used to see if we can gain deeper insight into what this commandment means. The first example we will consider is in Genesis 2, where the word חָמַד (hamad) is used in a positive context:

Genesis 2:8-9

And the LORD [YHWH] God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant [חָמַד] to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Here, חָמַד (hamad) describes the “pleasant” trees in Eden. Obviously, God made these trees pleasant on purpose, and it was not wrong to appreciate their beauty or to desire their fruit. Wanting to eat from these trees was a good, healthy desire. Now, let’s consider another example:

Genesis 3:6

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired [חָמַד] to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.

Here, the tree that was desired was the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which God explicitly told Adam and Eve not to eat from (Genesis 2:17). So, in this case, the word חָמַד (hamad) is used in a negative context. The desire for the forbidden tree was a bad, unhealthy desire that led to sin.

Both these passages involve desirable trees, but one example of חָמַד (hamad) is positive and the other negative. What is the main difference between these two examples? The main difference is that the first

example involves a permitted tree, and the second example involves a prohibited tree. So, when the Torah prohibits “coveting,” we must understand that it specifically involves a strong desire for *something forbidden*.

We see this clearly in the Tenth Commandment. Why must you not covet your neighbor’s wife, house, or possessions? Because they don’t belong to you. They belong to your neighbor. They are forbidden to you. To elaborate, it is not wrong to notice your neighbor’s beautiful wife or nice house and think, “I really want to have a beautiful wife and a nice house too.” In fact, such a desire can potentially be quite good, inspiring you to work hard and someday have a beautiful wife and a nice house of your own. What *is* wrong is thinking, “I really want *my neighbor’s* beautiful wife and nice house.” Fixating upon *that* strong desire can lead only to sinful outcomes such as adultery and theft.

There is another element here that we need to emphasize. In his epistle, James makes an explicit distinction between “lust” and “sin”:

James 1:14-15

But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own **desire** [ἐπιθυμία]. Then **desire** [ἐπιθυμία] when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

Here, we see that “desire” or “lust” is distinct from sin but progresses toward sin. So, while desire can lead to sin if one allows it to, the desire itself is *not* sin. This principle also applies to sexual desires. Just like the desire for food, sexual desires are not inherently sinful. They are a natural and expected part of being human.

What, then, is the Tenth Commandment forbidding when it speaks against coveting? If the desire itself is not sinful, what specific action is being prohibited? The action being prohibited in the Tenth Commandment should be understood as the intentional focusing of one’s desires upon taking that which belongs to another. This may even include fantasizing and devising plans in one’s mind to seduce or steal. This type of thinking is *a conscious act of one’s will*, distinct from mere natural human desire. *That* is the essence of the Tenth Commandment. God is not condemning the desire itself; he is prohibiting the conscious and deliberate focusing of one’s desires upon taking what is forbidden—specifically, upon taking what belongs to another.

To put it another way, suppose your neighbor is grilling a delicious steak. You step outside and smell the aroma of that food, and you are then filled with a strong desire to eat it. This desire is quite natural, and it is not sinful. But, if you become so consumed by that desire that you start making plans to steal your neighbor’s steak when he turns his back, now you are coveting and sinning. That focusing of your desires is *not* natural. It is an intentional, conscious thought within your “heart”—that is, your mind and will.

This intention of the heart is what Yeshua is addressing in his teaching on adultery and sexual desire. And this becomes even clearer when we investigate the Greek grammar of Matthew 5:28. Let’s return to that passage now.

Looking in order to covet her

In his article on this passage, Jason Staples mentions that many modern English translations fail to adequately capture the meaning of what is being said in this verse. Most translations render Matthew

5:28 as “[everyone who looks at a woman with lust](#),” implying that the focus is on the manner of looking. However, Staples argues that the specific grammatical structure of this verse instead emphasizes the purpose or intent behind the action of lusting. (Jason A. Staples, “Whoever Looks at a Woman With Lust: Misinterpreted Bible Passages #1” August 20, 2009, jasonstaples.com). To illustrate his point, he notes other examples of where this same grammatical construction is used. Here are a few:

Matthew 6:1

[Beware of practicing your righteousness before men in order to be noticed by them...](#)

Matthew 13:30 (NASB 1995)

[...First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles in order to burn them up...](#)

Matthew 23:5 (NASB 1995)

[But they do all their deeds in order to be noticed by men...](#)

In each of these examples, the emphasis is on the purpose of the action. So, based on the other uses of this grammatical construction, Staples translates Matthew 5:28 as “anyone who looks at a woman *in order to covet* her.” As Staples writes:

Jesus is not suggesting that any sexual thought or inclination towards a woman is sinful. Nor is he suggesting that such thoughts or attractions being triggered by a look are sinful. The look is not the problem (nor is the presence of a beautiful woman, which some of that day tended to blame as the real problem); no, these are assumed. What is remarkable (given the popular misinterpretation) is that Jesus likewise *assumes the presence of sexual desire in the man as a given*, and that sexual desire isn’t seen as the problem. Instead, Jesus addresses the matter of intent, of volition, the purpose of the look. The issue is not the appetite itself but how a man directs this natural appetite and inclination.

—Jason A. Staples, “Whoever Looks at a Woman With Lust: Misinterpreted Bible Passages #1” August 20, 2009, jasonstaples.com

So, contrary to Andrew Farley, “looking with lust” does not “equal adultery.” Yeshua is not condemning sexual desire itself. Sexual desire is natural and, in fact, quite good when directed toward what is permitted—namely, one’s spouse. However, sexual desire can lead to the sin of coveting, which involves intentionally focusing one’s sexual desires on what is forbidden. When that occurs, adultery has already taken root in one’s “heart”—their mind and their will. This conscious and intentional thinking or fantasizing is the underlying cause of sins like adultery. In other words, adultery wouldn’t happen if one’s heart wasn’t already focused on adultery! So, rather than addressing merely the physical act of adultery, Yeshua targets the source of the problem—he targets coveting, which occurs within the human heart.

Your Eye and Your Hand

As we’ve argued, Yeshua is not setting up an impossible standard. He really does expect his followers not to look at a woman in order to covet her. But then how should we understand his illustrations about removing your eye or hand if they cause you to sin?

Matthew 5:29-30

[If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one](#)

of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

Andrew Farley interprets this passage as proof that Yeshua does not actually expect his followers to obey the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. Again, according to this view, Yeshua wanted to show his followers that living up to God's standard is impossible and that they should just give up trying. After all, achieving such a standard would require extreme measures like removing one's eyes or limbs. However, we find Farley's approach to this passage to be frankly absurd and inconsistent with a straightforward reading of Yeshua's sermon, as we've explained earlier.

Others argue that these illustrations are hyperbolic. Surely, Yeshua does not *literally* want people removing their eyes and limbs. So, they view these statements as graphic illustrations meant to emphasize the importance of eliminating sources of temptation. However, this explanation doesn't quite account for what Yeshua is saying. To give an illustration, when someone has severe gangrene, doctors do literally amputate the diseased limb in order to save the rest of the body. This is a very real and practical action. Similarly, if someone's eye or hand were truly causing him to sin—which is to say, condemning him to death—then it would not be hyperbolic to say that he should cut off his hand or pluck out his eye. It really would be better for him. Just as doctors are not being hyperbolic when they recommend amputation to save a life, Yeshua's words are not hyperbolic if an eye or hand could indeed lead a person to sin and spiritual destruction.

However, we still do not think that Yeshua expects us to remove eyes and limbs. We would suggest that these illustrations are better understood as *hypothetical* rather than hyperbolic. Yeshua says to remove your eye or hand *if they cause you to sin*. In such a scenario, losing an eye or hand would be better than losing your entire body. The key here is that your eye and hand do not actually *cause* you to sin. In the previous verse, Yeshua identifies adultery as taking place within the *heart*—that is, one's mind and will. In other words, sin originates in the human heart, not in one's eyes or limbs. Elsewhere in Matthew, this point is made more explicit:

Matthew 15:19

For out of the **heart** come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.

Yeshua's statement about removing your eye or hand if they cause you to sin is similar to saying that if your right foot caused you to catch the bubonic plague, it would be better to amputate it than let the disease take over your whole body. In this hypothetical scenario, cutting off your right foot would be the right course of action! However, in reality, since your right foot does not cause the plague, cutting it off would not solve the problem of the plague. Similarly, since your eye and hand do not cause sin, removing them would not address the root of the problem of sin. If they did cause sin, their removal would be the right course of action—but they don't. The point of Yeshua's hypothetical illustrations is to emphasize the seriousness of sin and the need to address it at its true source—the human heart.

Modern Application

Before we conclude, Yeshua's teaching in Matthew 5:27-30 raises some relevant questions for us today. We have established that sexual desire itself is not sinful and that Yeshua's prohibition against looking at a woman with lustful intent was essentially him just repeating the Tenth Commandment against coveting. We've also learned that coveting involves the intentional focusing of one's desires on what is

forbidden—technically on something or someone that rightfully belongs to another.

The first question to consider is how this passage applies to those who are not married. As noted earlier, the Greek word for “woman” (γυνή) in this verse is also the common Greek term for “wife.” This makes sense, especially if Yeshua is referring to the Tenth Commandment, as we’ve argued. The Tenth Commandment prohibits coveting your neighbor’s “wife.” This also makes sense with the mention of “adultery,” which inherently involves at least one married individual. Sexual sin between two unmarried individuals is fornication. It’s still a sin, but it’s not the same sin as adultery. Finally, Yeshua’s teaching on divorce in the following passage likely builds upon his teaching about looking with lustful intent. If a married man covets another woman, it could potentially lead him to wanting to divorce his own wife in favor of someone else. Hence, Yeshua makes it clear that legitimate grounds for divorce exist only in cases where the wife has committed some form of sexual immorality. For more on these issues, see our [“One Flesh”](#) series.

So, the context seems to indicate that, technically, Yeshua is addressing married people in this passage. If a man is unmarried, this teaching directly applies to him only if he is coveting a married woman. Having said that, the broader context of Yeshua’s teaching in Matthew 5 emphasizes the general principle of not setting one’s heart upon *any* kind of sin. This is why Yeshua discusses murder and hatred immediately before addressing adultery and covetousness. The overall principle is that we must reject the *desire* to do evil, regardless of the specific sin. This means that we should address *all* kinds of sin within our hearts, not just covetousness. If it is wrong to fantasize about murdering your brother or sleeping with your neighbor’s wife, we can safely say that fantasizing about committing *any* sin, including fornication, is also wrong. Simply put, just as a man who focuses his sexual desires on a married woman commits adultery with her in his heart, a man who focuses his sexual desires upon an unmarried woman commits fornication with her in his heart.

Once again, we should reiterate that sexual desire itself is not sinful, whether one is married or not. In fact, the drive to fulfill one’s sexual desires is a big motivation for getting married! God gave us these desires because he wants people to get married and to “be fruitful and multiply.”

This brings us to a second question: how does this passage relate to the problem of pornography? This is a major struggle for many people. In fact, a 2020 study on pornography consumption in the United States found that out of 1,392 people ages 18-72, 91% of men and 60% of women were reported having consumed pornography in the past month (Ingrid Solano, Nicholas R. Eaton, K. Daniel O’Leary, “Pornography Consumption, Modality and Function in Large Internet Sample,” *Journal of Sex Research* 57 (2020): 92-103).

Pornography use has been linked to a variety of negative behaviors and harmful psychological effects, including addiction, depression, eating disorders, romantic partner abuse, and an overall lower quality of life. Additionally, the porn industry itself has contributed to significant societal problems, such as human trafficking. These harmful impacts on individuals and society have prompted 17 states since 2016 to introduce resolutions recognizing pornography as a public health crisis (K. M. Nelson and E. F. Rothman, “Should Public Health Professionals Consider Pornography a Public Health Crisis?” *American journal of public health* 110 (2020): 151–153; A. Gewirtz-Meydan and Z. Spivak-Lavi, “The association between problematic pornography use and eating disorder symptoms among heterosexual and sexual minority men,” *Body Image* 45 (2023), 284-295; W. L. Rostad, et al., “The association between exposure to violent pornography and teen dating violence in grade 10 high school students,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 48 (2019), 2137-2147; T. Kohut and A. Štulhofer, “Is pornography use a risk for adolescent well-being? An examination of temporal relationships in two independent panel

samples,” *PloS one* 13 (2018), e0202048).

It is clear that consuming pornography has damaging consequences on a personal and societal level. Moreover, it goes against God’s design for sex. God intended sex to be a sacred gift shared within the loving and intimate bond of marriage, where husband and wife become “one flesh” and are “naked and unashamed” (Genesis 2:24-25). Reducing this profound experience to a sad solitary act in a dark room in front of a screen distorts and belittles this precious gift.

As we’ve argued, Matthew 5:28 specifically addresses coveting your neighbor’s wife, but the overall principle in Matthew 5 that we discussed earlier would apply to pornography use as well. Focusing your sexual desires on a person on a screen is to commit fornication with that person in your heart.

On a positive note, Yeshua’s message in Matthew 5 is an empowering one. Remember, merely having sexual desires is not sinful. It is what you do with those sexual desires that matters. Watching porn and fantasizing about the people on the screen is a *deliberate act of the will*. You are not helpless or incapable of resisting the urge to consume porn. It is a conscious choice, and it is within your control to make a *different* choice. Yes, it can be difficult to resist the temptation. But it is not impossible. And as you walk according to the Spirit, God will empower you to overcome the sinful desires of the flesh (Galatians 5:16-24; Romans 8:4).

Conclusion

Yeshua’s teaching on lust in Matthew 5:27-30 is not about imposing an impossible standard or condemning natural human desires. Instead, it emphasizes addressing the root of sin—that is, coveting. By echoing the Tenth Commandment, Yeshua explains that sexual sin within the heart is the deliberate and conscious focusing of one’s sexual desires on what is forbidden. His use of hypothetical illustrations, such as removing an eye or hand, highlights the seriousness of sin and the need to confront it at its source—the human heart, the seat of one’s thoughts and will. Yeshua is not condemning natural sexual desires. Instead, he says not to “look in order to covet.” He calls on us to properly manage our thoughts and desires, intentionally directing them away from what is forbidden and toward what is permitted. This expectation is reasonable and achievable. Yeshua really does want his followers to obey the Tenth Commandment, and to not look at a woman with lustful intent.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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