

Jesus On Sin

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[0:00] Thanks very much, Stuart. Good morning, everyone. Graeme and Stuart, both say, great to have you with us, whether you're in the building, watching on YouTube, or listening to the audio recording. Didn't Jesus say some strange things?

You might have listened to the reading this morning and thought, that can't be right. Can Jesus really mean that a lustful thought is equivalent to going the whole way physically?

Does he really mean that we're liable to go to hell unless we mutilate our bodies to get rid of sin?

Well, the answer, I'm sure, to both questions is no.

But we need to think what Jesus is trying to say to us. We mustn't let the fact that we're not necessarily taking him literally all the time blind us to the fact that he is trying to really challenge us this morning, to shock us out of smugness or complacency.

These verses are difficult to understand. They're also very difficult to apply. And I think if they don't make us feel uncomfortable, then we're really not understanding what Jesus is saying.

[1:15] We're missing the point. I want to use four statements that are very simply, I hope, will get us to the root of what Jesus is saying to us.

The first of these is sin is always wrong. Secondly, sin includes wrong thoughts. Thirdly, sin leads to judgment.

And fourthly, sin requires drastic action. Our passage is specifically about sexual sin, so we will cover that. But it also applies, I believe, to sin in general.

And these four statements should come to us with real force this morning as we think of the words of Jesus. Let's begin with a little bit of background.

If you've been here previous weeks, you will know this, but it's worth a reminder. We're in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' teaching between Matthews 5 and 7, principally to his disciples.

[2:19] And this little section that we're looking at over these few weeks starts with Jesus' words about the Pharisees. He says, Now, the Pharisees were sticklers for rules.

They looked at all the laws in the Old Testament, added a few things themselves, and they judged you by, could you keep the rules? If you stuck to the letter of their rules, you were okay.

Teachers of law would tell you what the letter of the rules was, but Jesus says to his disciples, you need more than that. It's not enough just to have a list of rules, and you say, yes, I'm okay on that one, I'm okay on that one, then you don't need to worry.

What really matters is not our external appearances and the rules that we keep. It's what our hearts are like. And if our hearts are right, then we can go beyond the righteousness of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law.

This section in Matthew has been described as Christian countercounter, and that's what it is. It's challenging people's assumptions about what is right and what is wrong and what they can get away with.

[3:41] Now, below that verse, there are six examples, as JT pointed out to us last week, that Jesus gives to us. I've just put up the headings in the NIV, but I think they're quite descriptive.

He talks about murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, eye for eye as revenge, and love for enemies. And in each of them, he begins a bit like this, you've heard it said, but I tell you.

You've heard it said is looking back mainly to the Old Testament, to what's written there, particularly in the early books, in the books of the law. And Jesus says, you can read this, and he's not contradicting it, but he says, I'm telling you, it means a bit more than you're interpreting it as.

You're not just to stick by the letter of what's there, you need to be obedient to the Spirit as well.

And that, I think, is the background, particularly to what we're going to be looking at this morning.

So let's get into our four statements. First thing Jesus says is, sin is always wrong. It's very easy to get into a habit of thinking that little sins don't really matter.

[4 : 59] Big sins, yes, we all would say, yes, they're wrong. There are lots of things we say that's really wrong. But small things, well, it's understandable. It's excusable. So someone might say, I'm a very truthful person, but like everyone else, I tell an occasional white lie.

And that means actually, they're not really that truthful, like they would say. And Jesus says, we can't have grades of sin and say some are unacceptable and some are acceptable.

Sin is always wrong. So a particular context here is adultery, marital and faithfulness. It comes from the Ten Commandments, what's said here.

It's the seventh of the commandments. You do not commit adultery. But what do we mean by that? The Pharisees and religious leaders said, well, that's the physical act.

That is the sexual act with someone you're not married to. And they probably thought as they were looking through and assessing their obedience to the law, well, that's an easy one. I can just take it off.

[6 : 04] I've never done that. Jesus' teaching here is that it's important not just to stick to the letter. We need to think of the principle.

So he says that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. Now, Jesus isn't being a killjoy here.

Sexual desire is a gift from God and in the right context is intended to bring us pleasure. We can see that, for example, if we look at the Song of Songs in the Old Testament.

But the right context for sex is within marriage, between a husband and a wife. Outside of that, sexual activity is sinful.

Now, I think we may use degrees of sin more as an excuse when it comes to sex than to most other things. At one end, there are sins that we should all find really abhorrent, such as sexual abuse of children.

[7 : 07] And we are horrified by them. At the other end, there are things which we may not even think about or recognise as sinful. We read a slightly racy story in a magazine or on social media, and we maybe don't think twice about the fact that we're taking pleasure from something that maybe we shouldn't be.

And in between that, there's a multitude of different actions and thoughts, which are all sinful. Now, that being said, there are some clear lines.

There's a clear line drawn here. In the law, it says, do not commit adultery, physical adultery. Jesus' hearers would all recognise as being wrong.

Now, actually, most people today would agree with that. Most people would say, if you're unfaithful to your partner, that is a betrayal, that is wrong, with likely consequences for the couples involved and potentially for their families.

Sadly, although it's recognised as wrong, it's still very common. Christians would go further. We would look at the Bible and recognise that it forbids all sexual contexts outside marriage, even where those involved are both single.

[8 : 23] And that's going further than most people around about us would go. But there's a clear line there, and it's quite likely that many of us can say, I haven't crossed that line.

Jesus draws another line here. It's not enough, he says, to avoid committing adultery physically. We mustn't fantasise about it. I don't believe he's saying the fantasy has the same consequences as the act.

The act of adultery could directly affect somebody else and leads them into sin. It affects two couples and possibly also, as I said, could lead to the breakup of two families.

Fantasising doesn't do that, at least not directly. But Jesus still makes it clear that adultery in the heart is sinful and is within the spirit of the command not to commit adultery.

It's also not without consequences because it will affect how you relate to one woman or one man and reflects how you view the other gender in general.

[9 : 32] But there's a bigger picture here, I think. It's not that we've got three lines and below them we're okay. The big picture is that we should never excuse one sin on the basis that it's not as bad as another sin.

We can't think that as long as we don't cross a particular line, we're all right. You may think your sin is less serious than someone else's. You might be right.

But it's still sin. Too often, even as Christians, we accept the norms of our society in what we do, what we say, what we watch, what we read, what we think.

And that's to the detriment of our spiritual health. We fail to recognise things as sin that if we really thought about it, we would realise where.

They become blind spots to us and we need to act on that. Thomas Brooks was a 17th century Puritan preacher and writer.

[10:36] And here's something that he wrote which I think is very telling. He says, many times small sins are more dangerous. Great sins startle the soul and awaken it to repentance.

But little sins breed and work secretly until they trample the soul. So never think, what I'm doing, it may not be quite right, but it doesn't matter.

All sin is wrong. I think at this point I need to say something else. You may be feeling that what I've talked about doesn't really reflect your position.

Far from being complacent about sin, whether sexual or otherwise, you feel overwhelmed by it.

You're filled with guilt and with shame about a habit or about something you did in the past.

Well, first of all, it's good that you feel the weight of sin. That's the Holy Spirit bringing conviction into your heart. But you also need to know that just as all sin is wrong, if your trust is in Jesus, his blood purifies you from all sin.

[11:52] You need to confess your sins to God and receive assurance of his forgiveness. You might feel that if other people knew about your sin, they'd be shocked by it.

That may be true, it's probably true of many of us. But God knows the full extent of your sin and he's willing to forgive and forget so that your shame can be removed.

Psalms 32 is a great example of this. David is weighed down by the weight of his sin. He feels his bones wasting away. His strength is being sapped.

But he says, Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

If you're feeling overburdened with guilt and with shame this morning, that can be your experience too as you accept what Jesus has done for you and put your trust in him.

[12:58] Let's move on though and we'll look at the second statement I've made. Sin includes wrong thoughts. So we're still in verses 27 and 28 if you're following through in your Bible.

And Jesus is making some very important points about our minds. Our thoughts matter and they're often sinful.

If you think lustful thoughts he said, that is a form of idolatry in itself. Thoughts matter first because of what they can lead to in our actions and our words.

Last week when we were thinking about murder, JT pointed out that unjustified anger is the seed of murder. Well, we could say similarly today that lustful thoughts are the seed of adultery.

One thing can easily lead to another and before we know it we're too far down the line. Lustful thoughts also affect our relationships because they make us view those who we find physically attractive as objects rather than as real people.

[14:14] But wrong thoughts matter for their own sake as well because they draw our attention away from what is wholesome and right. They affect our relationship with Jesus and our prayer life.

When we don't control our thoughts we're depriving ourselves of the peace and the joy that should come from our relationship with Jesus. In our Sunday evening studies upstairs we've been looking at Paul's letter to the church in Colossae.

And chapter 3 has a lot of echoes of Jesus teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Verse 5 I think is particularly relevant to what we're thinking of today.

Paul writes put to death therefore whatever belongs to your earthly nature sexual immorality impurity lust evil desires and greed which is idolatry.

When Aaron Lockhart spoke to us on this passage he points out that in this verse there's one sin of doing and lots of things of thinking.

[15:23] Paul covers the whole range of illicit sexual acts with one description sexual immorality. But then he has four vices which are mental impurity lust evil desires and greed which is idolatry.

Now it looks as if the list is kind of widening there as Paul goes on to some extent it is but if we think of greed as being the belief that everything and everyone exists for our pleasure that could describe sexual sin as well.

And Paul says the initial battles in the mind might lead to sexual immorality but it's the thoughts that matter that we need to get under control to begin with.

Our spiritual battle is won or lost in our minds and we can only be triumphant in it if we ruthlessly focus on our thought life.

It's not just lust that trips us up of course. Pride, anger, hatred, a multitude of other things that are in our minds that are sinful and that we need to get rid of.

[16:36] Paul says in Philippians four, 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.

I think I need another short diversion here as well. Occasionally and maybe quite often an impure thought will come into your head or you'll wake up from a dream and feel shocked about it.

These things are a reflection of the fact that we have a sinful nature. They may well diminish if we grow closer and closer to the Lord and if we focus on our thoughts but they probably won't disappear completely.

Now sin in these things doesn't lie in the thoughts arising, that's the devil tempting us. Where the sin comes in isn't what we do with them. If we harbour them and develop them in our mind then we are being led by the devil into a sinful habit.

We need to get away from them when these things come. Perhaps go and do something constructive or go and talk to someone about something else or get out your Bible and think about Jesus and let him give you the strength to take your mind off it.

[18:03] Our reaction should be like Joseph when Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him and he fled and not like David who saw Bathsheba bathing and let the sight lead to a doubtery and ultimately to murder.

Paul said to Timothy flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness faith love and peace along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.

And if he was bold enough Timothy could quite legitimately have responded flee the evil temptations of age as well. Temptation doesn't go away as we get older.

We need to have our minds under control as much as we possibly can to fulfill them what is right and what is helpful to us. Right, so these are the first two things.

Let's move on now. We're going to look at verses 29 and 30. And the third thing we want to think about is that sin leads to judgment. Twice in these verses Jesus says that our bodies could end up in hell unless we take drastic action to avoid sin.

[19:18] The word used for hell here is Gehenna. Gehenna was a location outside Jerusalem but at one point was used for human sacrifices but in Jesus' day was a rubbish dump which was constantly on fire to kind of purify the rubbish that came to it.

But it's used commonly by Jesus and by others at the time to describe the place of ultimate eternal judgment for sin for those who don't accept him.

Jesus is making it very clear that there is a judgment for sin. No sin is inconsequential and unless our sins have been forgiven we will face the fires of hell, we will face God's judgment on us.

But there is a difficulty here. Graham and others have pointed out in previous weeks that the Sermon on the Mount is delivered principally to Jesus' disciples.

is not about how we win God's favour, it's how we should live when our trust is in Jesus. But that's quite hard to reconcile with Jesus suggesting that his disciples might end up in hell if they don't take appropriate action.

[20:30] So what is he actually saying here? One possibility might be that Jesus is exaggerating for effect. That is certainly the case as we come on to the actions he expects from us.

But that seems very unlikely to me. Jesus isn't going to talk in that way about something so devastating and so eternal as hell.

A second interpretation might be Jesus' disciples, Christians today, can lose their salvation because of sin that comes into their lives. Once they were saved, now they're not.

But that goes against the clear teaching of Scripture. That salvation is based on faith in Jesus, it's not based on any good works of ours.

John says in his Gospels, everyone who believes in Jesus has eternal life and in the same Gospels Jesus says, I give them eternal life and they shall never perish, no one will snatch them out of my hand.

[21 : 35] So if our trust is in Jesus, our eternal future is secure. Perhaps what Jesus means here, I'm not certain, but I'll throw it out as a suggestion, perhaps what Jesus means here is that if we persistently don't take sin seriously, it could suggest our faith was never truly in Jesus.

There were people following him, looking like his disciples, who would later fall away, who weren't really disciples of Jesus. If we can see all that Jesus has suffered to bring us forgiveness for sin, all that came on him as he went to the cross, the physical suffering, the separation from God, and if that doesn't affect the way we live, it probably means at least that we haven't understood the cost of our salvation to Jesus.

Jesus says his disciples must have a righteousness that exceeds that to the Pharisees and teachers of the law. And people who are careless about their sin simply don't have that.

Now I'm not talking here about situations where we struggle with sin, even if we feel we fall time and time again. Paul says in Romans 7, Paul the great apostle, what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate, I do.

That's many of our experiences. And he exclaims, what a wretched man I am. Now no one's going to suggest that Paul was not a Christian.

[23 : 12] Struggling with sin doesn't mean that you're not a Christian, that you've not been saved by Jesus. But if we don't feel the need to struggle, then I think we need to take Paul's advice, examine yourself to see whether you are in the faith, test yourself.

Remember that Christians, as well as those who haven't trusted in Jesus, will have to give account of their actions to Christ. For Christians won't lose their salvation, but they will be held accountable for what they have done for the Lord Jesus.

Will Graham is the grandson of Billy Graham and is a quite well-known evangelist himself. I read a very perceptive article he wrote where he suggested in the past when people chose a way of life that went against the Bible's teaching, they normally left their faith behind.

But now they're more likely to stay in the church and attempt to justify their actions, possibly by distorting scripture. Now we can see that's true of sexuality, among other things.

and Will Graham says, it's a grave mistake to take sin lightly or to believe the lie that since Christ died for our sins, there are no consequences to our actions.

[24 : 33] There are spiritual and eternal, not to mention physical costs to be paid when we ignore God's guidance through his word. And he continues, rather I would encourage you to cling to Christ and dig so deeply into the Bible.

that you can spot a lie from the truth. We need to recognize that sin leads to judgment and we need to take it seriously.

And taking it seriously, our last point, means that sin requires drastic actions. Jesus says, to avoid hell we need to be willing to gouge out our right eye or cut off our right hand.

Our eye would represent what we see clearly, the inputs into our body, if you like. Our hand would represent what we do, the sins that we commit. And in both cases, the right one is seen as being stronger than the left, and that's why he specifies right eye and right hand.

Now, it's almost universally agreed that we're not to take Jesus literally here. He's using hyperbole, exaggeration for effect, and he isn't suggesting that we should mutilate our bodies.

[25 : 50] If we took him literally just in the matter of sexual thing and our thought life, there would be few of any men here who weren't maimed. I can't speak for the woman, but maybe similar too.

In any event, mutilating our bodies wouldn't keep us from sin if there was no change in our heart.

But if we don't take this literally, it doesn't give us an excuse not to take Jesus' words seriously.

We can't say, well, obviously that's not what he's meaning, and just go away and forget it. Jesus is aiming to shock us into action. So what would that mean for us?

Just a few suggestions. It will vary depending on where our weak spots are and the things that we can recognise that trigger us to sin. It could affect the books that we choose to read.

Are they wholesome and helpful? It could affect the websites we visit, the social media we view, the programmes that we watch on our screens, the films we go to.

[26 : 54] If any of these lead us into sin through our eyes, then Jesus says we need to cut them out, remove the thing that brings the temptation that leads you to sin.

And we need to go further than that. it could also affect where and with whom we spend our time. If a friendship or relationship is unhelpful spiritually, you may need to give it up.

It might even affect the job you do if that is leading you in some way into temptation. Now it's not for me to tell you what you should do, I need to examine my own heart.

but I'm trying to prompt all of us to consider what we may need to change to reduce the danger of falling into temptation and maybe get out of a bad habit we've been unable to shake so far.

This has been a pretty heavy study and I think that reflects the seriousness of the passage. Let me finish with some encouragement and that also will hopefully help us as those in the church head towards taking communion together.

[28 : 06] If we do take our sins seriously, if we do feel the weight of them, we may also doubt our ability to change. It's one thing to recognise that we're going wrong, it's another to be able to do something about it.

And in our own strength that is undoubtedly true. But we're not left alone, we don't have to do it by ourselves. When we receive Jesus as our saviour and Lord, we also receive the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is our counsellor, leading us into all truth, helping us to see how we should live. He also provides us with the weapon we need when the evil one attacks us, the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.

And the Spirit's work in our lives give us the strength to obey and to grow spiritual fruit. That's why he's here, that's why Jesus sent his Spirit to draw us to him and to help us to live before him.

And we also see Jesus. Jesus who is tempted in every way as we are, but who never sinned. Jesus who took our sins on himself when he was nailed to the cross and took the punishment that should have been ours.

[29 : 28] Jesus who triumphed over evil and death and today is a living saviour and lord. What would be impossible in our strength is possible in his, through following his example, through seeking his help as we pray.

So today, if you're struggling with your sin, take heart. It can be overcome in the strength of Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

If you've been challenged on your complacency about sin, then do go away and consider what you need to do to take it more seriously.

And if you've never put your faith in Jesus, then know that he offers you forgiveness for sin and hope for the future through his death on the cross. You need to trust him today.

I'm going to pray now. And I'm going to use the words of Catherine Scott as our prayer. They'll be familiar to many of us and I think very relevant. So let's pray together. And our prayer is, search me, know me, try me and see every worthless affection hidden in me.

[30 : 47] All I'm asking for is that you'd cleanse me, Lord. Create in me a heart that's clean. Conquer the power of secret shame. Come, wash away the guilty stain of all my sin.

Clothe me in robes of righteousness. Cover my nakedness with grace. All of my life before you now I humbly bring.

Amen. Amen. Thank you.