

# What is Heart Adultery?

Hespeler, 12 February 2023 © Scott McAndless

Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Psalm 119:1-8, 1 Corinthians 3:1-9, [Matthew 5:21-37](#)

**T**he passage that we read this morning from the Sermon on the Mount came from the Good News Bible. And I'm glad that it did because this passage, as it has been traditionally translated, has likely caused as much mental anguish as any passage in the Bible. I know that there was a time in my life when it caused me no end of feelings of guilt and grief. I suspect that I am not the only one.

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is going through various laws and teachings from the Old Testament. He affirms these Old Testament laws, but then teaches his followers that he is expecting even more from them.

## The Teaching on Adultery

And when he comes to the law concerning adultery, what he asks of his followers seems, at first glance, to be very extreme, at least the way it has usually been translated: **“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 lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”** I don't think we're quite sure what to do with the teaching like this.

Jesus is suggesting that we can commit the most heinous of sins merely by entertaining a stray thought in our minds. I don't know about you, but I don't always feel as if I'm in complete control over the thoughts that come into my mind.

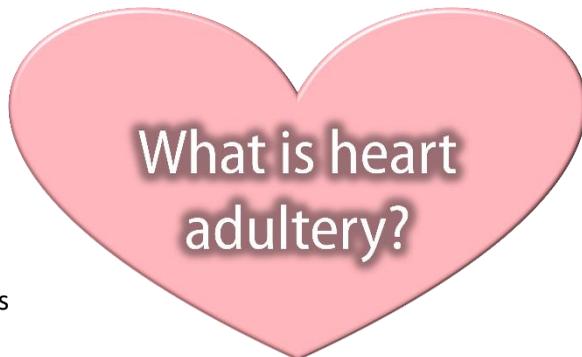
## Serious Thoughts

I mean, if I get mad or really upset, I might entertain, if only for a moment, the thought of doing something awful to someone. I wouldn't do it of course. I'm sure that none of us would. But what Jesus seems to be saying with this commandment is that that doesn't matter. It is enough to have merely had the thought. That is just as bad as doing whatever horrible thing crossed your mind.

And, just in case you didn't think that Jesus was serious about this, he goes on to add: **“If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.”** And then he says the same thing about your hand. So, just in case you didn't get it before, Jesus is saying that this thought crime he is talking about is so serious that it will get you sent to hell, directly to hell. Do not pass go, do not collect \$200.

## A Specific Kind of Thought

But that's not even the worst part. The worst part is that the language as traditionally translated, leads us to assume that Jesus is talking about a very specific kind of thought that is going to get you sent you know where. And we all think that we know exactly what kind of thought he is referring to. I don't think I need to spell it out for you! The idea of the wickedness of that kind of thought is something that is encoded deep into our culture.



## A Natural Kind of Thought

And what is the problem with that? The problem with that is that the kinds of thoughts and desires that we associate with that word are actually built into our very humanity. I would go so far as to say that we have been created by God to have such thoughts and desires.

That doesn't mean that all expressions of such thoughts are bound to be good. It certainly doesn't mean that such desires can't become twisted or misdirected. But to feel such things, is simply a part of being human. It is something that has been placed within us in order to help us to propagate the species, form strong bonds and is part of an expression of who we are.

It is also something that is generally felt more strongly by people in their youth. And so, what has often happened is that young people have read this saying of Jesus and have struggled with immense feelings of guilt and even self-hatred as a result.

## Some Very Negative Results

This has sometimes led to self-destructive behavior. It is also led some to suppress natural and healthy feelings and thoughts in a way that has been very unhealthy to themselves and can sometimes lead to relationship problems down the road. As I say, I think that this passage has had a lot of negative impact.

So, I have got to ask. Is this really what Jesus intended for us to understand with this teaching? Did Jesus really want us constantly monitoring our thoughts and diverting our eyes away from anything that might send our thoughts in some dangerous direction? Did he really mean to say that self mutilation was somehow preferable to having the wrong thoughts? I believe that these are very important questions, and you deserve to have an answer to them.

## The Old Testament Law

What Jesus is doing in this part of the Sermon on the Mount is making commentary on the Old Testament law. He is not doing this in order to critique the law, but in order to encourage people to follow it according to its deepest intention. And so, he introduces this part of the sermon by saying, **“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”**

## Three of the Big Ten

The particular law he is talking about in this section is, of course, one of the big Ten Commandments, the one that says, **“You shall not commit adultery.”** (Exodus 20:14) That is important to realize because, when Jews like Jesus quoted a short passage from the Torah, they would have expected their listeners to have the verses that surrounded the one that they quoted in their minds.

And do note that immediately after the commandment against adultery in the Book of Exodus, the very next commandment goes like this: **“You shall not steal.”** And then, two commandments later, we have the final commandment that goes like this: **“You shall not covet your neighbour’s house; you shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, male or female slave, ox, donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.”**

## Aren't They all Saying the Same Thing?

There is something odd about these three commandments. There is a sense in which they all three are saying the same thing. The commandment against adultery means you shouldn't take someone else's spouse. The commandment against stealing means you shouldn't take someone else's stuff. But then we get to the "thou shalt not covet" commandment and, all of a sudden, we seem to be going over the same ground, don't we?

Except now, instead of saying that you shouldn't take your neighbours' stuff, it is saying that you shouldn't even want to take your neighbour's stuff. And, since your neighbour's wife is also included in the list of your neighbour's stuff (which I know is problematic, but we'll come back to that), this commandment also seems to cover the prohibition against adultery.

## How you Obtain Other People's Stuff

So, what is going on here? Are not all of these commandments in a sense saying the same thing? Well, not exactly. According to the Hebrew way of thinking, stealing somebody else's things was bad, but stealing was not the only bad way of getting what properly belonged to someone else.

The Bible also teaches that if you get your neighbour's property by doing things that we would consider perfectly legal, like lending them money, charging them excessive interest and seizing their property when they couldn't pay, that was pretty much just as bad. It was also problematic if you managed to amass profits to yourself by taking away from others what they needed.

And so, the commandment against coveting was meant to address all of the ways in which people sought to take what other people needed to live. So, while stealing and committing adultery were really bad, the root of the problem was coveting. The root of the problem was greed and desiring what other people had that they needed.

## The Word Translated as Lust

Okay, so why does that matter? It matters because Jesus jumps directly from talking about adultery to looking at somebody with a certain kind of desire. But the word that is translated there is actually the same word that is used to translate the word *covet* in the Ten Commandments. Jesus is actually making an explicit reference to the tenth commandment.

So, what Jesus is actually saying here is not that we need to be fearful of having certain thoughts, and that any such thoughts will immediately condemn us to hell. He is actually inviting us to shift our focus instead to the commandment against coveting. To put it another way, of course stealing and committing adultery are bad, but let's not just focus on *how* we take other people's stuff, let's focus on *why* we want what other people need.

## The Real Problem

And the problem with why we want what other people need does not have to do with it being motivated by a certain kind of desire, at least not as that has been generally understood in western culture. It is actually about the way you treat things that other people need. It is about not being greedy when you deal with other people. That means, not robbing them by illegal means, of course, but it also means not seeking to take from them through unsavory or unethical business practices. It is about treating people properly by respecting what they need to thrive in life.

## Treating Women Like Objects

Ah, but there is one other issue in all of this that we struggle with as modern people. The Old Testament law against coveting, as I mentioned before, assumes a woman is a mere object. The law lists, among your neighbour's possessions, your neighbour's wife. That certainly does not mean that women actually are merely objects. Of course not! It's just that this law was written within a society where women were seen that way. And even divine laws like the Ten Commandments were filtered through the cultural understandings of the people who received them and used them.

But is Jesus saying anything about all of that when he points us to this commandment about coveting? I believe he is. The laws against adultery both in Old Testament times and in Jesus' times were based on patriarchal assumptions. That is to say, they assumed that your neighbour's wife was part of your neighbour's property. The law had to be formulated according to the assumptions of the society, otherwise it would have made no sense to people. And so, adultery was considered to be a property crime.

## Jesus Comments on the Assumption

But notice what Jesus does with that. When he says that you ought not to look at a woman with a covetous attitude – because that is what he is saying – he is in effect saying that it is wrong to look at a woman as a piece of property.

Now isn't that interesting! And when we come to read it that way, we realize that what Jesus is really concerned about is not that we might entertain, however fleetingly, certain thoughts or ideas that are actually a part of the way in which we have been constructed to operate.

## Jesus Ultimate Concern

No, what Jesus is ultimately concerned about is how we treat women, how we treat people. He wants to make sure that we do not treat people like mere objects. He is concerned that we deal with them as persons who have their own thoughts, needs and concerns. I would even say that there is, in this teaching, an implied criticism of the patriarchal society that Jesus lived in and the way that it operated.

So, what do we do with this passage of scripture that has caused so much misery for those who have strived to be the people that Jesus has called us to be? I think, first of all, that we can all relax a little. It was never the intent of Jesus for you to live in constant fear of the things that you might think. Jesus never taught you to be afraid of what you might see or how you might look at something or someone.

## How you Treat People

No, Jesus was much more concerned with how you see people. If you are a man, do you see women, as possessions to be used and manipulated? Or do you respect them for the people God created them to be? And of course, that doesn't just apply to women but anyone because it has always been so easy to fall into that habit of treating people like objects.

The notion that this is all about thinking the wrong way or looking at things in an unacceptable way has actually prevented us from dealing with the real challenges that face us, living with full respect for all of the people that we meet.