

Righteous Relationships

The Master Class in Discipleship Series, July 2 & 3, 2022 | Matthew 5:27-37
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How can disciples of Jesus have righteous relationships?

We all have hopes for and expectations of our closest relationships. Just ask France and Australia.

Until recently, France and Australia were in a "Facebook Official" relationship.

Australia liked France's fleet of diesel submarines and was planning to buy a bunch from them.

Suddenly last year, Australia announced it was now dating the United States. Australia liked the United States' big, strong fleet of nuclear subs and wanted to buy some of them.

Of course, France was angry. Worse, France said, "I found out on Facebook!"

To which Australia responded, "But I texted!" Everything was a mess for a while.

Recently, Australia agreed to give France's class ring back, so things seem to be better.

How can disciples of Jesus have righteous relationships? That's a big ask!

Righteousness might not be our first, most important expectation of our closest relationships.

Our closest relationships like marriage, family, and good friends bring out the best side of us.

However, they can also bring out the worst in us.

Perhaps righteousness is exactly what our closest relationships require!

Jesus consistently calls his disciples to surpassing righteousness.

Jesus made that clear in **Matthew 5:20** when he said,

"For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

He was telling them that they needed something more than empty works righteousness they had learned through their leaders. They needed righteousness of the heart.

Surpassing righteousness focuses our attention on the heart of the matter.

Our thoughts and motives can be sinful or right.

Sinful thoughts and motives eventually become sinful actions.

Jesus' surpassing righteousness calls us to address these heart matters.

In our passage today, Jesus calls us to surpassing righteousness in our closest relationships.

Since we have such high expectations of our closest relationships, this is important.

So today we will lean in together and find

Three Heart Changes That Help Disciples Have Righteous Relationships:

1. Disciples don't flirt with adultery; they are mentally pure.

Jesus addressed adultery and mental purity in Matthew 5:27-30:

"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. 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."

Jesus started with the common ground of the Old Testament teaching on adultery.

Jesus quoted from the Ten Commandments. **Exodus 20:14** says,

"You shall not commit adultery."

This commandment is reinforced repeatedly.

The word "adultery" narrowly refers to a married person having sexual intercourse with someone other than their spouse.

Jesus affirmed that his disciples don't flirt with adultery.

Then Jesus got to the heart of the matter with lust.

Anyone looking on another with lustful intent in their heart has already committed a sin; that sin is like adultery whether it is acted on or not.

Lust is different from healthy desire for our spouses.

Lust is a problem because it objectifies the person we are lusting after.

Lustful thoughts tend to lodge themselves in our minds, eventually dominating our thoughts.

Lust is the precursor to all kinds of improper actions.

Jesus unpacked the seriousness of his teaching about lust with two disturbing images.

He says that if our eye causes us to sin, then we should tear it out and throw it away.

He adds that if our hand causes us to sin, then we should cut it off.

In both cases, Jesus adds that it is better to go through this life without a body part precious to us and important to our proper functioning now rather than to end up in hell for eternity.

Versions of this teaching occur in several different places in the Gospels.

Does he mean this teaching literally?

Third-century Christian scholar Origen of Alexandria thought so. Origen thought that the material world was an evil illusion meant to trap us, and he embraced extreme forms of asceticism. To handle his own problem with lust, Origen cut off the parts of his body that he thought produced his lust.

However, the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. disagreed and banned the practice.¹

If Jesus didn't mean for us to mutilate ourselves to prevent temptation, what did he mean?

¹ John Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020 edition), p. 69.

Paul makes the same point in different words in **Romans 8:13**,

“For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.”

By “the flesh,” Paul didn’t mean our bodies; he meant our sin natures.

Paul and Jesus are, then, essentially saying the same things. Our sin natures will constantly tempt us. If we give in to our sin nature over and over again, it will kill us spiritually.

However, if we put our sin nature to death (if we fight it over and over again and submit to the Holy Spirit work in us), then we will live. Our spiritual nature will take over.

Jesus’ teaching on lust leads me to ask a question: What inputs are we allowing into our minds?

Our minds are receiving inputs constantly.

The inputs we allow into our minds are not neutral. They shape our thoughts; they give us the contents of our thoughts and form channels our thoughts go down more easily.

Inputs are being pushed at us constantly. If you’re living a digitally wired life, the number and strength of those inputs just keeps going up.

We live in a hyper-sexualized culture, so many of the sources of input coming at us regularly are filled with lust and shaped to produce lust.

So, I ask again, what inputs are we allowing into our minds? Let me rephrase the question:

What inputs do you want to allow into your mind now?

Disciples don’t flirt with adultery; they are mentally pure.

2. Disciples don’t casually divorce; they are intentionally faithful.

Jesus addressed divorce and intentional faithfulness in Matthew 5:31-32:

“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

Jesus started with the commonly understood Old Testament teaching on divorce.

The Old Testament allowed husbands to divorce wives with a certificate of divorce.

Moses created this process in **Deuteronomy 24:1** and following which begins,

“When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house ...”

This practice protected women. Men could not abandon women or send them away without giving them clarity about where they stood. To give them a certificate of divorce meant that they were free to pursue another marriage.

How to interpret this teaching was debated through the centuries. By the first century, there were two leading schools of interpretation, the schools of Rabbis Shammai and Hillel. Rabbi Shammai taught that divorce was allowed but only when the wife committed some grave offense. Rabbi Hillel, however,

taught that if a wife burnt her husband's food or if the husband found someone more attractive, divorce was allowed.²

This was where the Law, the debate, and custom stood during Jesus' ministry.

Then Jesus got to the heart of the matter with casual divorce.

Jesus said that divorce except in the case of adultery was essentially forbidden.

In Matthew 19, Jesus explained why. He said that divorce violated God's design for marriage. When a man and woman marry, they leave behind all attachments and become one flesh. That speaks about their physical intimacy, and it speaks about the fact that they are united spiritually in God's eyes. No one can rip that bond apart.

Therefore, Jesus said, what Moses wrote about divorce was simply to accommodate human stubborn sinfulness. It wasn't God's original design.

We do not have time today for a full discussion of divorce.

Divorce and remarriage are complicated topics.

To cover them adequately, there are multiple other New Testament passages to consider.

Plus, this is not a sermon on divorce. It's a sermon on righteous relationships. What does Jesus say here about surpassing righteousness in relationships for his disciples?

We come away realizing that disciples are intentionally faithful in marriage.

When we get into marriages, we do so with no intention to ever separate. We don't maintain an escape hatch mentally that we can use if things don't work out to our liking.

If we consider what Jesus says all around this brief teaching on divorce, it guides us in how to be intentionally faithful in marriages.

Back in Matthew 5:21-26, Jesus talked about anger. He cautioned us against ungodly anger and anger that stews. If we are to be intentionally faithful inside of marriages, there is no room for anger to take root and turn into bitterness and contempt.

In Matthew 5:27-30, Jesus talked about lust. He cautioned us against wandering eyes. If we are to be intentionally faithful inside of marriages, we must protect ourselves from seeing someone else and wanting them more.

Looking forward, Jesus will address oaths in Matthew 5:33-37. We are to be people who do what we say. If we are to be intentionally faithful inside of marriage, then we must be honest people who do what we say and keep our commitments.

Jesus calls his disciples to do the work to make marriages work.

Disciples don't casually divorce; they are intentionally faithful.

3. Disciples don't rely on oaths; they are habitually honest.

Jesus discussed oaths and the habit of honesty in Matthew 5:33-37:

"Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by

² Stott, p. 73.

heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.

Jesus started with the common ground of the Old Testament's expectations about oaths.

This teaching started with the commandment to avoid taking the Lord's name in vain.

Later, the Old Testament says that we may not swear falsely and invoke the Lord's name.

Finally, **Numbers 30:2** clarifies that this applies to making promises, oaths, or pledges:

"If a man vows a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth."

So, let's review the tradition Jesus claimed everyone knew: the name of the Lord is special, we are not to take it in vain, so we are to fulfill any vow we make in the Lord's name.

Then Jesus got to the heart of the matter with the habit of honesty.

The Law presented people with a dilemma. If they failed to keep a promise or fulfill an oath they took in the Lord's name, they were in trouble.

If they told a lie even accidentally and swore to it in the Lord's name, they were in trouble.

How then might they take oaths, make promises, or enter into agreements?

They found workarounds by swearing by things that sounded holy but weren't. We see the remains of this discussion in the examples Jesus cites.

Then Jesus cut to the heart of the issue again. Everything was created by and belongs to God, so if you swear by it, you are still swearing by God.

Furthermore, there is nothing we can do to ensure our ability to keep a promise. We can't even change the color of our own hair (without help anyway).

Jesus calls us to the habit of honesty. What does habit of honesty look like?

We do what we say we're going to do. If we have to resort to oaths and vows to assure someone of our truthfulness or reliability, then that means we haven't been truthful or reliable on a regular basis before.

We are who we appear to be. We don't rely on our words to spin a picture of ourselves that doesn't match the truth.

We tell the truth. We make sure that our words are reliable. We make sure people can count on us to tell them the truth, even if the truth is unpleasant. We don't have to do so harshly; we tell even unpleasant truths in as loving of a way as possible.

Disciples don't rely on oaths; they are habitually honest.

God deals with our hearts, then our actions.

Ann Atwater and C. P. Ellis remind us that hearts usually change before actions.

Atwater was a single mother of two girls. She struggled to raise them in Durham, North Carolina in the 1960s in a dilapidated house on an unpaved street. Atwater became an activist for housing reform.

Ellis also lived in Durham, not too far from Atwater. He too struggled to make ends meet. He worked multiple jobs and also lived in a dilapidated house.

Atwater was a black woman, and Ellis was a white man.

Atwater dealt with her frustrations through her activism.

Ellis dealt with his frustrations by joining the Klu Klux Klan.

In 1971 when Durham was working toward the integration of schools, they called a ten-day community meeting to build understanding and find solutions.

Atwater and Ellis were selected to co-chair the committee leading the meeting.

The two hated each other. Atwater hated Ellis; she pulled a pen knife on him at one point. Ellis hated Atwater; he had a machine gun in the trunk of his car ready for action.

Interestingly, both were also professing, active Christians.

During the meetings, the two realized that they were each dealing with similar problems.

And in their war with each other, the children were suffering.

Their hearts changed. They started working together and became lifelong friends.³

Hearts usually change before actions.

God is the one who fundamentally changes hearts.

By heart we mean the seat of our emotion, desire, passion, reason, and will.

The heart is the place where our most noble impulses come from.

It is also the place where every evil thought and desire we have comes from (Matthew 15:19).

We rarely if ever change our actions without changing our hearts.

Our hearts don't change simply because we decide that they will change.

Nor do our hearts simply change on their own.

Our hearts begin to change when we are convicted of our sinfulness and need for God.

Our hearts really change when we accept the gift of forgiveness, regeneration, adoption as sons and daughters of God, new life, and eternal life that God offers us.

Our hearts continue to change as the Holy Spirit reshapes them and makes them holy.

God is the one who fundamentally changes hearts.

That's why it is so important that Jesus is addressing his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount.

When we look at the Sermon on the Mount, we aren't looking at a series of life hacks that we can follow like pros. We can't simply do what Jesus says and live happy, fulfilled lives.

In fact, it's very difficult to do what Jesus talks about in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus addresses the heart. To have the heart he talks about, we need Jesus. We need the forgiveness Jesus offers and the Holy Spirit working inside of us to live our what Jesus says.

So, Jesus is consciously talking here to his disciples.

Disciples of Jesus are the ones who can have righteous relationships.

Are you ready to become a disciple of Jesus today?

³ <https://allthatsinteresting.com/cp-ellis>