

## **“On Lust & Objectification”**

### **The Way of Jesus**

**Downtown & Lexington**

**September 20, 2020**

It's good to be with you all, today. As a heads up, it's likely today's sermon is going to hit some very adult concepts, so if you're a parent and you don't think your kids are ready to hear about serious sexual topics, it might be worth pausing the video and getting them situated elsewhere before moving on.

I want to start today by picking up on something Jon touched on last week regarding what it means to be human. In the opening pages of the Scriptures in **Genesis 1:27** it says:

#### **Genesis 1:27**

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

This is something theologians call the **“imago dei”** or **“the image of God.”** That the essence of humanity, what it means to be human, is to be made in God's image.

This is the thing that sets humanity apart for the rest of creation. We are different than everything else. Humanity has a unique design, calling, and honor that other creatures do not have.

Here's what I mean, when a lion attacks another lion, no one gets PTSD. Nobody forms coalitions against lion on lion crime. No other lion is sitting there horrified and thinking, “Oh my did you just see that?! We need to call someone.”

But let a human do that to a human... and we're gonna do something about it... because humans are different. Eat a steak? Most folks aren't batting an eye. Eat a human... you're gonna get locked up.

Humans are different. Humans carry an inherent worth and dignity by the sheer fact that they are made in God's image. And as humans, we are meant to share that honor and dignity towards each other. True righteousness is honoring God as God and honoring humans as those made in His image - or as the Scriptures summarize it, “to love God with all your being and love your neighbor as yourself.”

Thus, any act that treats a human as less than this - whatever that may be, murder, oppression, slavery - is condemnable. This is why God's people must care about racism, and abortion, and the litany of other injustices that can happen towards minorities, immigrants, and the poor. Because despite how the media presents them, those things aren't simply political or social issues, they are Imago Dei issues.

Now, my guess is that as modern Americans, the vast majority of us hear those words and in our innermost being say, “Yes and Amen.” We high-five each other in our hearts because we think we believe this. We tend to think our moral compasses are attuned to this and that we live our lives accordingly.

The problem is Jesus is about to apply this in a way that you have been taught it doesn't apply - to our sexuality and marriages.

**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.

So, just like last week, Jesus is coming after the heart of God's law. The heart behind God's command against adultery is dealing with lust in the heart. But, what does Jesus mean when he talks about lust? I know what most of us probably think it means, but *what exactly is lust?*

"Lust" is a somewhat troublesome word for some of us. At best, we narrow it down to sexual desire. So, in our minds, lust becomes this religious word that we use for the feeling you get when you want to have sex. The truth is that is a bit too rudimentary.

Biblically, the word for lust in greek is "**epithymeo**". It is translated in other places as "coveting"... which is the wanting of something that is not yours or that you cannot have. A selfish, often insatiable desire. Greed - the selfish or insatiable desire for money and wealth, is in this sense, is the lust of money.

And this is important to understand because it clarifies some things. **For one, it means Jesus is not simply talking about attraction or appreciation of beauty.** To look at a woman or a man and find them beautiful or attractive is not a sin. Beauty is a good thing, a part of God's good design. That's normal and healthy.

**For two, he's not condemning romantic or sexual desire wholesale.** According to the Scriptures, romantic and sexual desire are also good things. If you don't believe me go re-read Genesis 1 and 2 and see God's instructions for our first grandparents or the way in which Adam breaks out into poetry when he gazes at his naked wife... or, if you really want to get the idea, go read the Song of Songs - its an entire book of the Bible that celebrates love and sexuality between a husband and wife.

And all of that matters because if you don't understand it, you may be tempted to think that Jesus is calling us to some sort of asexual, ascetic lifestyle...or to be stodgy and prudish about sex. But, that's not the case - Jesus is the embodiment of the creator God - who created the world and beauty and our bodies and even sex. And he did it with skill and wisdom and design and purpose of a master craftsman. This is who Jesus is.

The problem that Jesus is addressing here isn't sexual desire per se, but something much deeper.

Jesus is dealing with a core problem in the human condition: **the objectification of human beings. Specifically here, it's sexual objectification.**

Objectification is what happens anytime we look at a human being as less than an image-bearer of God, but instead as something to be used and/or consumed for my own purposes. Specifically here, it's turning someone into an object, a commodity, a consumer good that exists for our sexual gratification.

Jesus is exposing that the heart behind God's command against adultery - is to love and honor the image of God in others. As **Romans 13:9** says

**Romans 13:9**

For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

The heart of Jesus' sexual ethic is to be a person who doesn't treat other humans as objects for selfish pleasure, but one that loves and honors their dignity and worth as persons made in God's image.

Jesus reiterates this in a little different way just a few moments later. Jump down a few verses to verse 31. We'll come back to 29 and 30.

**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.

Now, there is a lot going on here and we don't have time to unpack all that this means for marriage and divorce. I'll hit some of it in the midweek podcast, but I want to draw your attention to one thing Jesus is doing here.

Jesus is referencing a passage from Deuteronomy 24 and it's not even really a passage about divorce, per se but about making sure that if divorce happens that women aren't taken advantage of. It's actually a pretty beautiful passage that shows God's heart for the vulnerable.

But, by Jesus' era, a popular interpretation of the verse was that it meant you could divorce your spouse for any reason, as long as you did what was necessary legally. So, if you found your wife to be displeasing to you, for any reason, you could write her a certificate and send her away... if she no longer met your standards of beauty, if you were attracted to somebody else - some interpreters even said that if she burnt your meal this was grounds to send her away.

And in this cultural context, this could have devastating effects on women. It would have left many without a stable means of survival - which meant that many would have to resort to living on the street or giving themselves to prostitution or other oppressive work.

And Jesus is saying, “this is not how it works in the Kingdom.” You’ve missed the heart behind this. You are, in fact, still treating another human as though they were an object that you can acquire or discard whenever you please.

You see, it’s the same root problem he just talked about with lust. A disregard for the dignity and worth of image-bearers.

What Jesus is doing in these two sections of His sermon is applying the Imago Dei into how we think about and approach sex and how we think about and approach marriage.

When you toss someone aside because they no longer meet your expectations or aren’t satisfying you the way you want to be satisfied... that’s a denial of the image of God within them. When you sin sexually, when you lust, when you take that long second glance and drift into fantasy in your mind, when you sexually objectify another human - that is a denial of the image of God within them.

And if we can just be honest for a second, this is the air we breathe.

Virtually everything in our culture from our dating apps to our entertainment is working to groom us to think about other human beings and human bodies as commodities.

The most obvious example of this is porn. Did you know that the porn industry in the US alone is a \$16.9 billion dollar industry? And the entire thing is built off objectifying the bodies of other human beings for sexual gratification.

- 25% of all online searches are for porn. For the record, that's 68million requests per day.
- 40 million Americans are regular visitors to porn sites. And don't think that because Jesus is primarily talking to men in this context that this is just a male thing. 1/3 of all porn consumers are women.
- The average age that someone is first exposed to porn is 11. That's the average. That's elementary school, for what it's worth.

And lust-directed, objectifying content isn't just in porn anymore, it seeps into virtually all of our entertainment. In fact, copious amounts of our TV shows now have scenes that would've been considered porn fifteen years ago, and we don't even blink an eye at them - which ought to tell us just how desensitized to objectification we've become.

But, let's be clear, it's not just porn. Porn is the easiest to spot and call out, but it's all over the place. In our magazine aisles, in our conversations, in our advertisements. We are bombarded with messages that a person's worth, value, and dignity are connected to their physical features and sex appeal.

And this messaging doesn't just objectify the beautiful people portrayed... but it also - and we don't like to talk about this - it also objectifies those who don't fit our cultural definitions of beauty by communicating over and over that they are worthless.

We rarely talk about the devastating effect objectification has on those who don't have that same sexual allure. Who don't turn heads walking down the sidewalk. Who don't have that same leg up in the world that beautiful people have - and study after study shows that they do - they get promoted more often, make more money, have more friends... just because they won the genetic lottery.

And so we obsess over bodies and how we look and who we attract. Holding ourselves to some sort of standard that we strive for - a standard we feel burdened to maintain and often depressed when we don't meet. You gotta have this shape, and be this size, or this tall.

So, we treat our bodies like ornaments instead of instruments. We nip and tuck and lift and pull and implant and inject and photoshop and filter to try to meet the standards. And when we see others who do meet them... we crave, we fantasize, we envy, and compare. And those who don't measure up we tend to subtly disregard.

And what Jesus says about this - when this way of thinking and relating to others takes over. It's not just that it's wrong... but that's dangerous.

**Matthew 5:29-30**

If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. (Now, that sounds really aggressive. Hold that thought, we'll come back to this in a moment, but keep reading) 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.

The word translated "hell" in English here is actually the Greek word, "gehenna" or "Gehinnom" in Hebrew. And it was actually a very real place that Jesus' audience would have been very familiar with. Gehenna, otherwise known as the Valley of Hinnom" had a long torrid history. Historically, it was a place where ritual pagan child sacrifice was performed. In light of that, the prophets often spoke of it as a place of judgment.

And by Jesus day, it had become, for lack of a better term, the city dump. It was a valley outside of Jerusalem where the people would take their waste, filth, unusable junk including dead animals to get rid of them and burn. So it's significance lived on in the Jewish psyche as a place of destruction and waste.

And Jesus is saying this is where unbridled objectification will take you - to the eventual destruction of your life, your mind, your soul.

Now, obviously, none of this is to take anything away from any future implications of what Jesus is saying about literal hell, but it would be a miss to not recognize very present factors of this reality.

As much as hell is a destination, it's also a trajectory.

Sometimes we can get so hung up on God sending people to heaven or hell when they die, that we fail to realize that many of us are moving towards and/or living in hell on earth right now... and what comes after this life is actually only an extension of what we've already begun within it.

**Jesus' point is that the end result of objectification is destruction - it's hell on earth.**

Now, I know that some of you are going to need me to back that up and prove it because we are told constantly that sex is no big deal, but I know there are others of you who know exactly what Jesus is talking about and you know He's right.

Some of you know just how much damage and destruction can happen from this kind of objectification.

- Some of you started looking at objectionable content years and years ago. And it felt harmless and benign. But, now, you can't stop. Porn has become your go-to coping mechanism. It has disrupted your relationships, your jobs, and even your daily activities. You're addicted to it and feel owned by it. Hell on earth.
- For others of you, the cultural standards for body image are just always on your mind. How you look is constantly in your head, especially when around other people. Perhaps, even isolating you from others because you can't imagine being close to someone who you think is more attractive than you. And if you were honest, you live with a low-grade resentment towards them and God for it. Hell on Earth
- And I know for many of us it's lead us down some dark roads of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and the like... Hell on Earth.
- Some of us have been the victims of sexual assault - someone ingrained with the idea that you were just an object for their personal pleasure acted that sin out on you. And you live in the wake of recovery from those events. Hell on Earth.

The world we live in is constantly trying to tell us that there is nothing to be concerned about, but as soon as you ask someone who has been directly affected by it, that lie just gets exposed.

Ask a child of divorce if their parent's divorce, if their parent stepping out on their spouse was no big deal? Ask a spouse who just got cheated on, or has a spouse addicted to porn, see if they say it's no big deal. They won't. Every time their answer will be, "It's a huge deal and so destructive."

Feminist author Naomi Wolf once reminisced,

### **Naomi Wolf**

The young women who talk to me on campuses about the effect of pornography on their intimate lives speak of feeling that they can never measure up, that they can never ask for what they want; and that if they do not offer what porn offers, they cannot expect to hold a guy. The young men talk about what it is like to grow up learning about sex from porn, and how it is not helpful to them in trying to figure out how to be with a real woman...For the first time in human history, the images' power and allure have supplanted that of real naked women. Today, real naked women are just bad porn.

I heard an interview recently with a relatively famous female comedian. She spent the first half of the interview discussing how the only thing that can really get her turned on anymore is rape... in her words, “not real rape, but consensual fake rape.” She said, “I *want* to see people treated like objects and *I* want to be treated like an object.” And she basically celebrates it like this unrestrained perspective on sex is so liberating. But, in the second half of the interview, it’s almost like she lifted the curtain back a bit and confessed, “To be honest, I feel like a terrible person and have been pretty depressed... I’m really afraid that I’ll never find love and this will just be it.”

Utterly heartbreaking, but this is what she believes about herself because this is what objectification produces. It diminishes and dehumanizes - both those we objectify and even ourselves. And it doesn’t stop there.

- According to **Dr. John Foubert** the president of an organization that researches sexual violence called, One in Four, “There have been over 50 studies showing a direct link between pornography and sexual violence.” Because what happens when you view people as objects for long enough... you start treating them that way.
- **Taina Bien-Aimé** the Executive Director for Coalition Against Trafficking in Women said, “Pornography really is prostitution on screen... the traffickers are the same, the pimps are the same. They just have a camera in the room.”
- **Dr. Melissa Farley** the Executive Director of Prostitution Research and Education went on to add “There isn’t pornography over here, and trafficking over there... they’re interlinked.”

While you think it’s just you and your computer screen, there are real men and women with souls being oppressed on the other side.

And this is what Jesus is saying: objectification is never benign. It’s never victimless. It’s Hell on Earth... Whether that be an addiction to porn or the inability to experience sexual pleasure with a real human being, eating disorders and body image issues, the crippling burden of guilt or shame, the death of intimacy, or the death of a marriage, the collateral damage of an affair or the outright mental and physical oppression those we objectify... destruction is always coming in its wake.

And this is why Jesus seems so extreme in his call to action...

If this is what sexual objectification does, then it must be rooted out. If we are going to follow Jesus then we must take decisive action against the objectification of other image-bearers.

**Matthew 5:29-30**

If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away...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.

**The way of Jesus calls for radical action towards sin.**

It's hard to find ways that Jesus gets more aggressive than this. Jesus is not teaching self-mutilation. If he was, if I may, He was missing the most obvious part of the body to cut off. No, it's hyperbole for effect, but He is serious: take drastic measures to root it out of your life - don't just manage your sin, you must amputate.

The question this forces upon us is "am I willing to take radical action against objectification? Am I willing to look silly in the name of fighting sin? Because no one else is going to do this and no one else can do it for you. Are we willing to do whatever it takes when it comes to honoring the God-given value and worth of our fellow human beings?"

I don't know what "cutting your hand off" or "plucking your eye out" should look like for you. The truth is, I think Jesus wants us to wrestle with what this means for each of us individually. What is the thing that leads you to temptation? Cut it off. Because the temptation is objectification and the objectification leads to destruction! CUT IT OFF.

- Maybe there are certain shows that just need to be off-limits for you. Maybe TV-MA is TV Not-For-Me. Maybe you might consider, that even shows without that tag aren't good for you. At some level, you might consider that the Bachelor objectifies humans and relationships and it may not be healthy for you... it's not good for your soul or mind. Maybe you need to cancel Netflix or even have a TV-free home/life.
- Maybe you don't need to be alone with your computer. Maybe you need to have a dumb phone instead of a smart one or invest in accountability software.
- Maybe you need to stop following certain people on Instagram because when you see what they post it leads you to objectify other image-bearers. Maybe you need to delete Instagram all together because it leads you to objectify yourself.
- Maybe you need to stop hanging out at bars or parties where you know you're likely to search for the best commodity and go home with someone who is not your spouse.

It certainly means we need to strive to have a culture of honor. Honor in the ways that we relate our spouses and our brothers and sisters and even ourselves. And so, we need to repent for all the ways we've embodied otherwise- whether that be through habitual porn usage or addiction, an objectifying thought life, or perhaps even a physical affair or divorce - we ought to confess these things to God, our spouses, and community to rid them of their power, put them to death... and learn to walk in the way of Jesus.

I wasn't sure if I was gonna go here but I am. If you're a married person (honestly, if you're single and looking to get married, too you probably need to hear this), but if you're married and you find yourself discontent with your spouse's body type. And I don't mean, you're concerned with their health. There's room to be concerned about how they steward the instrument God has given them. I'm talking about those of you who would say the certain layout of a woman's curves are your "type" and since your wife doesn't have that layout you conclude that she's not your type. Listen... biblically speaking, your wife -whatever shape she is - is your type. And to think about her body otherwise is an exercise in denying the image of God in her. You need to repent. Because you know who made her body, God did. You gotta cut that off.



Likewise to the women, hear me, Prince Charming is a myth. That guy you keep comparing your husband to... you're only seeing his highlight reel. And don't think that by fantasizing about life or sex or marriage with him that you're not being equally objectifying. You gotta cut that off, too.

Single brothers and sisters, Jesus' words here should radically shape the way we think about dating. What we're looking for and how we approach it. Listen, I get that it is hard these days... but hear me, a lot of the ways you're being told to approach finding a relationship is just turning people into a consumer product, a commodity... like what you see, swipe right. Don't? Swipe left. At some point, that does something to how you think about another human. I would go as far as to say that if as followers of Jesus if we approach dating and relationships in the exact same way as the rest of the world, we've totally missed a huge aspect of what Jesus has to say here about humanity. You gotta cut that off.

And I know that some of us don't just find Jesus' words challenging here, but borderline impossible because we just feel owned by this in all sorts of ways in our lives.

In far more ways than I can imagine, I know when it comes to sexual sin most every one of us has been affected by it - by committing it or having it committed against us. And for the record, that includes me, I don't stand up here on some ivory tower as though I'm exempt. My past is colored with sins of porn use and viewing women as objects to boost my own meager self-esteem.

But the good news of Jesus is that he came for the sinner and the sinned against. While the sexual ethic of His Kingdom is high, this same King Jesus spent a lot of his time with people who hadn't kept it. In fact, those are the very people he said he came for. Over and over and over again in the accounts of His life, Jesus moves towards those who are sexually broken and sinned against - the woman at the well, the woman caught in adultery, the prostitute.

Jesus moves towards them with great love and compassion and grace. Jesus loves the sinner and those in need of healing. And that means you, too. He's not calling us to this to bring condemnation on us, but to give true life to us. In Him, and hear me on this, you are freed from your guilt and washed of your shame. Your sin and the sin committed against you is not the defining characteristic of your life... Christ is.

**But, He has come not only to free you from the guilt and shame of sin but to deliver you from its power, too.**

Do not let Jesus' high calling be misconstrued as an impossible calling. You can find freedom from lust. He's not calling you to something impossible. Hard, yes. But impossible, no. It will take time, and community and above all the power the Holy Spirit - but that is exactly what Jesus has brought to you.

We must understand that the look to lust is a choice. It is nothing more than a habitually-trained and culturally-reinforced rhythm of the mind - albeit a deeply ingrained rhythm, but a rhythm nonetheless. It is not the law of gravity and it can be broken by Jesus. You can be transformed into an unlustful person like Jesus... but it will cost you - the question is, "are you willing to pay that price?"

And in light of Jesus' words, I'd add, "Can any of us actually afford not to?"