

Going Deeper: If You Even Look
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
January 17,2021-AM Worship
Reverend Peter Jonker
Matthew 5:21-26

Many of you probably know the name Ravi Zacharias. Ravi Zacharias was a well-known speaker and Christian apologist. He rose to fame in the 70's and 80's. He went around the country teaching Christians how to answer the skeptical questions that unbelievers sometimes hurl at us, and even more than that he showed Christians arguments and evidences that could deepen their assurance of their faith. He was really good at what he did. My wife's family used to go to a Christian camp in the Adirondacks of New York State called *Camp of the Woods*. It was one of those camps where every week you'd have a big name speaker. Every summer Ravi Zacharias would come and speak for a week and he was always one of the great favorites.

Ravi Zacharias died last year. Shortly after his death, rumors started to leak out. Women started to come forward. Zacharias owned a couple of spas, and women who worked at those spas as massage therapists started to come forward with allegations of inappropriate advances, and inappropriate sexual contact. At first Ravi Zacharias' ministry organization denied everything. These women were making is all up! But more women kept coming forward with more allegations of behavior that shouldn't be described when children are present. The ministry started its own investigation, and just before Christmas came back with the admission that it was all true. For years this trusted Christian man, this man whom many of us looked to as a Spiritual guide, had been subjecting numerous women to lewd sexual advances and practices.

When I heard the news I said some version of "O no! Not again!!" because Zacharias is not an isolated incident. He's not even close an isolated incident. The headlines are littered with stories of prominent men of faith, pastors and leaders who do this sort of stuff. Men (and it is mostly men. I'm sure somewhere there's a story of a female religious leader who's done this, but I don't know it) who are in positions of leadership and responsibility, men who are professionally successful, men who show great professional discipline and self-control when it comes to running their work life, but who nevertheless plunge themselves into sexual sin! You know the names. Bill Hybels. Jean Vanier. Jimmy Swaggart. Jim Baker. Add to that list all the stories of 'regular' ministers guilty of sexual transgression, add to that the list of all priests implicated in the sex scandals of the Catholic church, and you find yourself saying, "Why, Why, Why?!?"

Part of the answer is, because sex is an enormously powerful human drive. We may not like to let on, but sex is always part of the churn in our emotional and imaginative lives. The churn is more dramatic when we are younger, it calms some as we get older, but it is always there. We may act as though sexual feelings and sexual attraction don't have that much power over us, but the truth is otherwise. And when we see people like Ravi Zacharias and Bill Hybels, grown men, men who know better, get swept away by their desires, we know this power is strong. We know that it can overwhelm us. This congregation gathered here this morning-both in the flesh and virtual-is full of people who have struggled to control and manage their sexual desires. The congregation gathered here this morning is full of people who have struggled with pornography and masturbation. This congregation gathered here this morning is full of people whose lives have been touched by the wounds of adultery and the scars of sexual regrets. All of us have found ourselves confused and overwhelmed by the power of our sexual desires.

The Bible knows the power of these desires. Which is why both testaments devote quite a bit of ink warning us about lust and adultery. In the Old Testament, we have the stories of Samson and Delilah, David and Bathsheba, Amnon and Tamar, and Solomon and his concubines. We hear the Proverbs warn us, 'my son, don't become intoxicated by another man's wife!' In the New Testament the warnings continue! Don't live lives of passionate lust like the pagans says Thessalonians. Don't be like the Gentiles who have lost all sensitivity and given themselves over to sensuality says Ephesians. Keep the marriage bed pure says Hebrews. Flee from sexual immorality says Corinthians. Put to death sexual immorality, lust and evil desires says Colossians. And in our passage, Jesus speaks to this strong desire by going deeper. He says "listen people it's not just the physical act of adultery and sexual sin that concerns me, it's the passions of your mind and the imaginations of your heart. This is not just about your body, it's about your soul!"

I will get into Jesus's teaching here in a moment, but before I do that, let me re-affirm some basic truths. Sex is not evil. God created sexual desire for the strengthening of relationships and also for joy and delight. We know that because in Genesis 2, God created Adam and Eve to be one flesh, which probably refers to the consummation of their union. We know that sex is good from passages like Proverbs 5 where the young man is urged to enjoy physical pleasures with the wife of his youth. We know that sex is good and God-created from the Song of Songs, a robust celebration of human sexuality. So God created sex to be good. Actually he created it really, really good which is why it is so powerful.

Jesus goes deeper with this powerful force by saying, "You people talk about adultery as if it's only about sleeping with someone else's wife, but I tell you that if you even look at a woman lustfully in your heart, if you even fantasize about being with that guy, you are committing adultery with them in your heart."

Jesus goes so deep with this command; I remember that my teenage self-felt some hopelessness when I considered Jesus' words. "Jesus, you gave me this sex drive, how do you expect me not to notice these gorgeous creatures who keep streaming by me in the halls of high school!?" Let me give some relief here, to my teenage self and to all of us. The Greek word for looking here is the participle *Blepon*. *Blepon* is more than just glancing, and *blepon* is more than just noticing, *blepon* is more like staring. In this case, *blepon* is specifically staring with lustful purpose. So if my teenage self-noticed a beautiful girl in the hall and found myself uttering an inward 'wow,' that's not a violation of Jesus' words, it's when the 'wow' turns into fantasy that things become a problem. Martin Luther, who often had a colorful way of explaining things, put it this way: "I can't keep a bird from flying over my head, but I can keep it from nesting in my hair."

But if that qualification allows us to breathe a little easier, the next word tightens the screws. "If your right eye causes you to sin gouge it out, if your right hand causes you to sin cut it off." 'Oh No! Jesus is calling us to cut things off!' As I said in the first sermon of this series, I don't think Jesus means this literally. If he did, all of us would be handless and blind. Nevertheless, Jesus literally means for us to cut things *out*. The power of the sexual drive is strong enough that we need to be proactively careful with it. Cut your eyes off to the kinds of things that are likely to spark lust in you. You know what they are. Everyone us is a little different, but you know the things and places and people and things you need to stay away from.

Maybe you've heard of the Billy Graham rule. He made it a practice to never travel, eat or meet alone with a woman who was not his wife. Some people have criticized the Billy Graham rule, saying it unintentionally sends the message that women are the problem and that it might

cut them off from places of power. Tish Warren wrote a gentle critique in *Christianity Today* a few years ago. She offered some alternative rules. To be fair to Billy Graham, it wasn't something he commanded for everyone; it was something he practiced for himself. He knew his own heart and so he cut certain situations out of his life to keep himself out of trouble. That's in line with Jesus. Whether you use Billy Graham's rules or Tish Warren's rules, that's the sort of cutting Jesus suggests in these verses. Jesus isn't calling us to suppress beauty. We don't have to be frumpy. We don't have to wear burkas and baggy clothes. Being attractive is a good thing! But we respect the power of our drives and so we cut ourselves off from certain situation and certain media as a way to stay out of trouble. It helps guard us body and soul.

Because sex is about both body and soul. Sex goes deeper than just the body; it goes to the soul. In his book *Sex for Christians*, Lew Smedes helps us understand the deeper side of sex. He talks about three levels of human sexuality.

First level of sex is the physical level of sex. The pleasure of sex and the neural response and the glandular response and the physical response. Often, this is the only level in which our society talks about sex. When you hear people talk about 'good sex' in pop culture, what are they talking about? Usually it just refers to the level of physical pleasure. The sex is good or bad completely in relation to the pleasure it produces. When sex is reduced to physical pleasure, it becomes very shallow and self-centered. It's all about my experience and my pleasure.

But sexual expression isn't just about pleasure, it's a tool for bringing two souls together. That's the second level. Let me give an example, an innocent example. Two 16 year olds are out on a date. It's their first one. They've been hanging out at school and talking at lunch. They've had fun together and maybe flirted a little. One day they're talking about a movie preview that they saw and the girl says "I really want to see that" and the guy says "me too!" and then the girl says "maybe we should go together!" And a little faster than he thinks he should have the guy says, "Yeah! Yes! Totally!" And they find themselves at the movies.

In the middle of the movie after much fear and trembling, the boy gently puts his arm around the back of her seat. What will she do? Will she stiffen? Will she lean away? She does neither. Instead she leans towards him. And, without looking, she rests her head on his shoulder. That's the only physical encounter of the date. The two of them go home that night and they are both so happy. Why? Not just because of the physical encounter, but because of what that physical encounter *means*. They are closer now. With that simple embrace they communicate to each other, "I care about you. You can trust me. If you tell me a sad secret, I will hold it gently and I will hold it close." It's not about the physical sensation of the head on the shoulder, it's about the building of mutual trust between two souls. That's exactly the same dynamic that takes place all through a romantic relationship until, in marriage, physical love makes it fullest expression. Two people open themselves up to one another physically as a way to say to each other's souls, "I will love you and care for you and cherish you as long as we both live."

So level one is the physical encounter, level two is the joining of two souls in a bond of affection and trust, and the third level is when the sexual relationship becomes a tool for sanctification and flourishing. The trust established between two people and partially maintained and strengthened by their sexual relationship, helps people walk together down the road of sanctification. Their deep trust helps them survive loss and tragedy. Their care helps them navigate worry. Their honesty allows them to tell each other hard truths. And, if the Lord wills it, children are added to the family and maybe grandchildren after that. Now these sexual practices and the rules that govern them become servants of a love and an intimacy that is incredibly strong and life-giving. Sex becomes a tool that helps ground intimacy in a whole family unit, a

family unit that can bring strength to a church, strength to a neighborhood, strength to the world. In that way, sexual intimacy becomes a tool for building the Kingdom of God. Which is what you'd expect.

I need to say two things before wrapping this sermon up. First a word to singles. I've just described how sex is a powerful tool for deep intimacy that we all desire and that God wants in his kingdom. It is not the *only* tool for intimacy. There are many others. Praying or working with another person, practicing hospitality, the discipline of regular conversation—all these are tools for connecting with another human being at a deep and spiritual level. Intimacy is the goal. Sex is just one of the tools. If you are a person who craves a marriage relationship and for whatever reason can't have that right now, it is painful. There are other tools.

Second, for those who fall into sexual sin of one kind or another, who struggle with the guilt of it and the damage we've done, there is this: Sometimes when I do a wedding, right before the vows, I walk over to the baptismal font and I pour water into it. And I say something like: "Bob and Mary are about to make deep promises to each other. They promise to stay with each other for as long as they both shall live. The strength for their promise does not just come from their commitment and their attraction to each other. The strength for this promise comes because years ago at this font God made a vow to them. He promised to be their God in sickness and in health and in joy and in sorrow." It points to the one who is the foundation of all our faithfulness. Jesus holds up a high standard of behavior in this passage. We aspire to that standard, but most of us do not meet it. The one who calls us to this high standard, is also the faithful one who picks us up when we fall. He is the groom, and we are the bride of Christ. We are not faithful in the marriage. He is. But through the power and mercy of the cross, he picks us up, cleans us from our sin and shame, takes off the soiled garments of our sin, and clothes us in white robes of righteousness. Thanks be to God for his great faithfulness. @Rev. Jonker