

Disciplining Our Hungers
Romans 7:15-20/Mt 5:27-30
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First Baptist Church Decatur
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Prelude

*Got a wife and kids in Baltimore, Jack
I went out for a ride and I never went back
Like a river that don't know where it's flowing
I took a wrong turn and I just kept going*

*Everybody's got a hungry heart
Everybody's got a hungry heart
Lay down your money and you play your part
Everybody's got a hungry heart*

*I met her in a Kingstown bar
We fell in love I knew it had to end
We took what we had and we ripped it apart
Now here I am down in Kingstown again*

*Everybody's got a hungry heart
Everybody's got a hungry heart
Lay down your money and you play your part
Everybody's got a hungry heart*

*Everybody needs a place to rest
Everybody wants to have a home
Don't make no difference what nobody says
Ain't nobody like to be alone*

*Everybody's got a hungry heart
Everybody's got a hungry heart
Lay down your money and you play your part
Everybody's got a hungry heart*

--Bruce Springsteen, "Hungry Heart," 1980

That Old-Time Asceticism

Christianity once had a reputation for being an ascetic, killjoy religion. Some of us are old enough to have been raised in churches that fit the description. Everything fun seemed to be against the rules. Cardplaying. Movies. Makeup. Blue jeans. Dancing. Alcohol. Sex. The only things you were allowed to do were drink way too much sweet tea and eat way too much covered dish supper. So everyone was sober, but no one's clothes fit very well.

And of course the Protestant version of Christian asceticism was a pale imitation of an older Catholic tradition that was much stricter. If you felt called to the highest path of religious devotion, you became a priest, monk, or nun. And these folks gave up pretty much all the main pleasures, for life – they gave up their freedom, because they were under the discipline of the Church. They gave up sex, in a vow of chastity. They gave up money as they vowed lives of poverty.

Protestants loved to make fun of what we described as Catholic legalism -- which we rejected because, after all, we are not under Law but under Grace. But then quite often we reconstructed our own form of legalism in response, which we did not recognize as legalism because it looked different from what the Catholics did.

And then, some years later, some of us sloughed off legalism so profoundly that we forgot that Christianity made any moral demands on us at all.

Jesus on Adultery: Mt 5:27-30

Here at FBC Decatur, we are followers of Jesus, or trying to be. This means that when Jesus teaches something, we take it as authoritative. Our assumption is that he knows better than we do how life is to be lived. And we have promised to follow him as Lord. Obeying him is one of those Things Christians Do.

In our Gospel text for this morning, Jesus once again seems to make a demand on us that seems very hard if not impossible.

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. 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...

We take on only the easy passages here, believe me.

A few weeks ago I suggested that it was a mistake to hear Jesus as simply equating anger with murder in Matthew 5:21-26. Instead he was *diagnosing the patterns of human behavior that lead to murder*. One of them was escalating anger. Escalate it far enough and you might just get murder. I went on to say that the thing to look at is what Jesus says to do when you feel your anger rising, or someone else's anger rising – drop what you are doing and go make peace.

I suggest that the same paradigm applies here.

Just as the ban on murder is in the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament, so is the ban on adultery. Murder is unjust killing. Adultery is unjust sex. If you are married, adultery is having sex with anyone other than your spouse. Just as murder is clearly wrong according to God's command, so is adultery.

But Jesus is *not* saying that anytime you feel attracted to the beauty (or the personality) of another human being, it is the same thing as having sex with them. Many have buried themselves in guilt because they were taught this. It is easy to see how people get there from this one verse but you also need to read the next two. Knowledge of the Greek also helps. I think it is best translated "anyone who looks at a woman with the intent to lust after her." It's not about the recognition of beauty, but about the desire to objectify and drool over.

The references to cutting off hands and tearing out eyes speak to the real point of the passage. ***Jesus is demanding that we discipline our hungers.*** In my view, the best reading of this passage is more like this:

When you realize you are attracted to someone other than your spouse, discipline yourself. Look away, move away, run away. Adultery happens when a spark of attraction is fanned into flame and finally into a relationship that breaks the marriage covenant. So cut it off at the pass.

This is not an impossible teaching. But it is a demanding one. It requires something of us. It requires us to discipline our hungers. But it requires this for good reason – because we have made a sacred covenant with God and our spouse, and that covenant must be protected.

Bruce Springsteen taught us all to sing "Got a wife and kids in Baltimore, Jack, went out for a ride, and I never went back. Everybody's got a hungry heart." Yes, it's true. Everybody's got a hungry heart. But Christ's people have a higher obligation than the demands of their hungry hearts. And sometimes when we follow those hungry hearts people really get hurt. Including that wife and those kids back in Baltimore.

Paul on the Divided Heart: Romans 7:15-20

It is not as if the Scripture doesn't communicate the difficulty of the human condition. We make promises, to God and others, and we fully mean them when we make them. But there is another part of ourselves. A lesser part. A weaker part. A temptable part.

Paul put it this way:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the Law is good; but in fact it is no longer I

that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.

This is one of the most psychologically rich and complex passages in the entire Bible. But don't let it be just about Paul. It's about all of us.

Have you ever felt this way?

I want to do the right thing. I know what it is, and I want to do it. But I find another Me, or another aspect of me, wants just the opposite.

I want to be kind to that kid at school, but instead I joined in bullying him today.

I want to forgive my neighbor, but instead I keep holding a grudge.

I want to never look at pornography, but instead last night I felt drawn back to it.

I want to stop overeating, but instead that carrot cake was too good to resist.

I want to never shout at my children, but instead I just lost it again today.

Paul wraps up the passage this way:

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the Law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Paul is finding layers within himself, some at war with God, some at one with God. Who is the real Paul? Who is the real "you"? Is it the one who desperately wants to do God's will? Or the one who wants to violate it? Both? Neither?

Is this a matter of body vs. spirit? The Christian tradition once said so, elevating the spirit as Godlike and the body as beastlike. But now we know the hungers that capsize our lives are at least as often located here [brain] and here [heart] as they are in those other regions.

Simply to blame bodily hungers is far too easy. After all, why do people have sex they shouldn't have, or eat more than they should, or less than they should? Is it because of their bodies? That's way too simple.

Sin -- the desire and the practice of violating God's will -- is sin. It wants its way with us; it has a place in us, near us, around us. "When I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand."

The only answer for our wretchedness, says Paul, is Jesus Christ our Lord. But...what does Jesus offer, exactly?

Amazing Grace: Pardon and Power

He offers us grace. And I follow one of my earliest Christian influences, the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, in describing grace as having two primary dimensions.

Grace is pardon + power.

Which means: what Jesus offers us is both pardon (forgiveness of our sins when we fail him and hurt others), and a new spiritual power to do God's will.

There is no question that this is what the New Testament teaches about what is supposed to happen in the Christian life. But we Christians have historically struggled to keep both pardon and power in balance in our theology and teaching.

Grace means pardon, which means God forgives sinners. And we know we need that forgiveness. We accessed grace as pardon when we first asked Jesus to be our Savior. We access it again and again every time we pray humbly for forgiveness. "When we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 Jn 1:9).

But grace also means power, which means God pours out his Spirit into our lives enabling us to live in obedience. Paul again, in Romans 8: "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies" (Rom 8:11). Here and elsewhere Paul clearly says that a decisive new factor has been introduced into the human sin problem ever since Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. The same power that raised him is now available to us to win this battle. We need God's grace infusing our lives with that power.

So What Do We Do?

Let me close by getting as practical and down to earth as I can. What shall we poor souls do about those hungry hearts that so often get us in trouble? How shall we get after doing one of the hardest of those Things Christians Do, which is disciplining our hungers?

1. ***Become aware of your own most powerful hungers, and the potential dangers connected with them.*** They may not be the obvious ones. It may not be money, sex, and power, alcohol, drugs, and thrills. It might be a hunger for significance, or for attention, or for praise; or a hundred others. Pay attention. Know your hungers.

2. ***Become aware of cultural voices and pressures that tempt you to follow your hungry heart rather than Jesus as Lord.*** Just because the coolest musicians sing about it doesn't mean it's right. Just because everyone at school is having sex or doing drugs doesn't mean you should.
3. ***Ask Christ to take lordship over your hungers, with no exceptions or evasions.*** Take it all to him. Be completely honest. Hold nothing back.
4. ***Stay connected to Christ, accessing his spiritual power through healthy devotional practice.*** Plug in through prayer, scripture reading, worship, retreats and community.
5. ***Have at least one soul friend who knows you and can help hold you accountable at this level of intimacy and vulnerability.*** Let that person know where you are most vulnerable, and ask for monitoring.
6. ***Trust Jesus for forgiveness when your hungers get the better of you.***

There used to be an old bumper sticker which said Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven. This was 2/3 true. We aren't perfect. We are forgiven. But we are also striving to do God's will. Grace may be free but it's not cheap. Let's not ever make it cheap. Jesus paid too high a price.