

UNDER THE KNIFE

A. Illustration: Commercial - Doing Surgery on Yourself

1. There is a commercial I have seen recently in which a doctor and his patient are talking on the phone. The patient is holding a kitchen knife, and the doctor is saying, "Now make a three inch incision between the third and fourth ribs." Then the camera pans to the patient who has a look of great uncertainty on his face.
2. The point the commercial is making is that the most ludicrous behavior we can think of is trying to do surgery on your self, and making your own investment decisions is just as ludicrous.
3. Conducting major surgery on your self? Totally unthinkable isn't it! – Or is it?
4. We are going to look at a passage that appears to promote just such a practice as normal, even essential, for the Christian life.

B. Matthew 5:27-30

1. This passage occurs in Sermon on the Mount: The primary focus of this entire extended sermon could be expressed as "If we are to attain to whole measure of the fullness of Christ, our faith must exceed ..."
 - a. Each prescription uttered by Jesus within this sermon is essential for achieving this goal of total Christlikeness.
2. The prescription of this passage reads -

"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery. But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.'" (NIV)
3. This has always been a troubling passage for me, and it has probably been troubling for any of us here who want to take the commands of Jesus seriously.
 - a. I was first drawn to this passage as a teenager, and I remember struggling to understand it. After all, as a typical teenage boy, it seemed that my right eye was always "offending me." Therefore, I was faced with the very real challenge of determining whether I was to interpret and apply this command literally or figuratively.
 - b. So I searched the commentaries, and at first was relieved to discover that all commentaries tell us it is obviously figurative; God would not expect us to actually gouge out our eyes or lop off our hands.
 - i. However, I discovered that there is a danger in making it totally figurative because we can then end up making it meaningless. There is no solution for our struggle with temptation. We just need to acknowledge its seriousness, and limp along as best we can, sometimes holding strong against it, and sometimes giving in to inevitable defeat.
 - c. This just was not satisfying to me. I desperately needed for God to offer me more hope than this. So I prayed for understanding, and many years later God answered my prayer. I believe he helped me to grasp the spiritual principle within this command.

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4. The insight came in regards to the statement, “If your right eye causes you to sin...”
 - a. One day, when I was rereading this passage for the umpteenth time, I believe God led me to ask the question, “What is the source of sin?”
 - i. It is not the eye, for the eye is but the instrument through which the real source of sin manifests itself.
 - ii. This truth is illustrated in Matthew 15:17-20 “Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man ‘unclean.’ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man ‘unclean’...”
 - iii. The implication of this truth for our passage is that I may gouge out my eye, but would that eliminate lust in my life?
 - iv. No! I could gouge out both eyes, and still be plagued with the sin of lust?
 - v. I could cut off both hands, and still be plagued with the sins of coveting and stealing?
 - vi. Why? Because the source of sin is the heart – that inbred nature of rebellion in the unsanctified, or that flesh of humanity that sin uses as opportunity for temptation even within the saved and the entirely sanctified.
 - b. Then it dawned on me, it is not the action of gouging or severing that is figurative. Instead, it is the objects of these actions that is not intended to be taken literally.
 - i. The eye and the hand are but the symbols of any instrument that sin may use to enter into or to gain control over our lives.
5. So what are we to conclude regarding the true meaning and application of this passage?
 - a. Sin and temptation are ravaging diseases that must be dealt with by drastic measures.
 - i. They are spiritual gangrene: even the slightest spot is life threatening, for it will quickly spread from infected tissue to healthy tissue until it has rotted the entire body.
 - b. The only cure is immediate amputation of the source of infection.
 - i. We must be willing to immediately and totally remove from our lives the source through which temptation leads us to disobedience.
 - ii. In this passage, the specific issue Jesus addresses is adultery. In today’s culture, this would be pertinent to online pornography. If this is an issue in our lives (and some experts estimate that it is for fifty percent of the male population – including ministers, and that it is a growing problem even among the female population), then the command of Jesus would be that we must be willing to do whatever it takes to cut off this source of temptation and sin in our lives: such as switch to a filtered ISP, confess our struggle to our spouse or Christian brother and have them regularly check the web sites we visit, move our computer to a more public spot, and, yes, if the situation is drastic enough, discontinue internet service at home.
 - iii. However, this does not apply to just the issue of lust, as is indicated by the second reference to the right hand. The spiritual issue against which we battle may be gossip. In which case the application of the command could be to end all encouragements to participate in such conversations by ending those relationships in which the offense occurs.

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- iv. The key is that when it comes to temptation and sin our attitude and action is to be that nothing short of complete amputation is acceptable.
- 6. The problem is that though it is black, puss-filled, and full of the worst stench, we look only at the good that comes from this infected hand, and we think only of the sacrifices we would be making if we were to live without it.
 - a. Under such conditions, it seems to us that the most horrid fate would be to live apart from this indispensable appendage.
 - b. So we continue to nurse it along, confident we can control the infection, determined we can save the limb through heroic measures, lying to ourselves that “it is not as bad as it looks.”
 - c. The worst part about it is that if we wait long enough to take the required measures, the infection will spread to the rest of the body until this hand looks like that hand, that looks like the leg, that looks like the torso, that looks like the head, and eventually the diseased flesh appears to us to be normal and healthy.
- C. So what is the primary message Jesus conveys to us in this command. It is this. We live in a gangrenous culture in which the dead and decaying is portrayed as the living and life-giving. As we who are believers move in and among this rotting world, we come into contact with its infested flesh and spirit.
 - 1. It is time for surgery.
Not that we would isolate ourselves from the world, but that we would not allow ourselves to become “of” the world.
 - 2. We have been given the scalpel - it is the Word imbued with the power of the Holy Spirit to expose any infection within us even to the dividing of the soul and spirit.
 - 3. This is the operating room – the very altar upon which the author of our salvation sacrificed his flesh that he could be perfected.
 - 4. What we must understand is that we, ourselves, are the only surgeons who may perform this procedure. God is the Great Physician who will bring healing after the operation is complete. However, He waits for us to be the ones who take up the instruments of delivery which He has provided. We are the only ones who can make the decision: Does this fetid, festering limb remain, or will it go?
 - 5. Our quest to attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ always leads under the knife.
 - 6. As Chaplain Lyke leads us in this closing chorus, will you listen to the diagnosis of the Living Word. Is there some operation that must be accomplished in your life? Is there some infestation that must be gouged out? Is there some disease that must be lopped off?
 - 7. If there is, know that the Great Physician waits to pour his healing balm upon the wound once we have responded appropriately, faithfully to his command.