

PATROL YOUR PLEASURES

When Jesus Frowns on Fun | Matthew 5:27-30

Jesus Was Fun

I invite you to think of an adjective that describes Jesus. How many of you instantly thought of the word **"FUN!"** Not too many, I imagine, and that's odd, if you ponder it. The Bible pictures Jesus as someone kids mobbed.¹ Have you ever known children to be attracted to someone who wasn't fun? The fishermen Peter, the finance guy Matthew, the political activist Judas were all willing to drop their day jobs and follow Jesus.² Can you imagine normal working men who'd leave their jobs to go road tripping with somebody who wasn't any fun? Women like Mary and Martha kept the light on, just hoping Jesus might drop by.³ Burned-out businessmen like Zaccheus climbed trees in hope of meeting him.⁴ Everyday people sought the company of Jesus.

People found the teaching of Jesus "fun" to listen to, too. He regaled people with marvelous images of camels grunting to get themselves through needle eyes, and old women scavenging under tables looking for lost coins. "Did you hear the one about the guy from Gonzaga who got mugged on his way down to the NCAA tournament," Jesus would say. "Guess who stopped to help him." It was that player, Samaritan, from the Arizona team." "You're kidding me?!" people would roar.

Christ's teaching was filled with drama, satire and irony and his vision of God and his kingdom was jammed with joy. Jesus portrayed God as this amazing Dad who's willing to forgive unbelievably stupid acts by his kids,⁵ and even by criminals,⁶ when they come to their senses. Jesus pictured the kingdom of heaven as a place where people's tears get dried up and replaced by singing⁷... where angels rejoice over people being found or coming home⁸... where banquet tables are overflowing and chairs hauled out of the closet so that anyone who's willing to accept his invitation will be sure to have a seat.⁹

The first miracle Jesus did was to change water into 150 gallons of the finest wine so a wedding party could on. One of the last things he did for his disciples was to host a Passover feast, tell his friends how eagerly he'd desired to share this meal with them,¹⁰ and then speak of his hope that they might know his joy.¹¹

It's important to remember all this for two reasons. FIRST, because it helps us understand why he so bugged the Pharisees, the most rigorous religionists of his day. They looked at this life-affirming, joy-producing, freedom-celebrating aspect of Jesus' nature and said: "*That just can't be God speaking.*" They looked at the way Jesus embraced such ordinary, imperfect people and thought: "*That just can't be God acting.*" They listened to Christ's critique of their way of life and the radical claims he made about himself and they said: "*We've got to get rid of this guy.*"

But there's a SECOND reason to keep this side of Jesus in focus. It not only helps us understand why the *Pharisees* sought to kill him. It also helps to balance our perspective when, in a few minutes from now, we may want to crucify him too.

When Jesus Is Not Much Fun

You see, there are times when Jesus does not sound like much fun. There are times when he says things that, frankly, smash up against our sense of freedom and fulfillment. There are moments when Jesus looks us right in the eye and says: **"You've got to learn to patrol your pleasures."** And this Word he speaks to us in Matthew 5 is one of those times.

Maybe you've heard the joke about Moses coming down from Mount Sinai and saying to the Israelites: *"I've got some good news and some bad news. The good news is that I pared God down to just Ten Commandments. The bad news is that the one about adultery stays."* Truthfully, of course, we're generally OK with this news at the start. I've yet to go over wedding vows with a couple I'm marrying where anyone says: "Um, is it OK if we leave a multiple partners option in there someplace?" When Jesus says: **You have heard that it was said, "Do not commit adultery... (Mat 5:27)** a few of us wince because we know we've failed badly someplace; but virtually all of us get, in principle, the importance of faithfulness to one partner.

It's the sentence that follows which is so much harder to take. Jesus says: **But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Mat 5:28)**. Wow. Is Jesus really saying that even a little fantasizing is not OK? What could be wrong with a little derriere-stare if we're committed to not touching? What's so bad about looking at an explicit magazine or website image, so long as we're not actually breaking our commitment to our marriage?

Carry the idea out further, because it isn't just sexual connections after which we lust, is it? Most of us get the notion that we're not supposed to be owned by things and that we're meant to be wise stewards of our resources. But is there really a problem with a little lusting after the things we see in catalogues and shopping malls, so long as we don't actually pull out the credit card? Most of us want to take care of our bodies so that they'll be healthy temples from which to continue God's mission for us in life. But is there really any problem if we just browse the refrigerator or candy aisle or tie one on now and then? What's wrong with this kind of innocent fun?

The Battle for the Human Heart

The only way to answer that question helpfully, I think, is to understand what the Bible says about the how the battle for the human heart is won or lost. Dallas Willard points out that so far as the Bible describes it, the human "heart" (or "will") is the executive center of our lives.¹² The writer of Proverbs says: **Above all else, guard your heart,**

for it is the wellspring of life (Prov 4:20-27). A spiritually healthy heart pumps out choices and conduct that influence for the better all your external relationships and activities. When my heart is healthy, I am better as a husband, as a parent, as a co-worker, and in all the other spheres of my life.

The Bible teaches that the health of our spiritual heart is influenced primarily through TWO arteries: our reason and our emotions. It pictures the destruction of the human heart as coming from the invasion of ideas, images, and impulses that clog our reason and corrupt our emotions to the point where our health is compromised.

The preeminent example of this is the story of the Fall recorded in Genesis 3. First the Serpent attacks down the artery of Reason: "*You can't really trust God. He's setting unreasonable limits. He just wants to keep YOU from pleasures and privileges he enjoys for himself.*" Then the artery of Emotion is compromised. Eve was led to feel that **the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom.** First, the Reason gets compromised: "*You can't trust God.*" Then the Emotions get breached: "*That forbidden fruit would sure taste good. It's desirable.*" And then the heart fails, the will falls. Genesis says: So Eve **"took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it."** Another poet put it this way: "'Who's there?' I cried, 'A little lonely sin.' 'Enter,' I said. And all hell came in."

Victory Is Won at the Perimeter

I have tasted hell myself in places and count as good friends several people who've lived there. One of these friends gave me permission to share his insights, gained from years of struggling against the pull of pornography, the habit of lusting and fantasizing about other women, and finally the full-blown heart-attack of adultery. "*The battle for the human heart, and all the health or horror that flows from it,*" this friend told me, "*must be waged at the perimeter of our lives. You can't retreat into the sanctuary of comparative righteousness, telling yourself: 'At least I'm not like so-and-so... or at least I haven't done such-and-such yet.'* You've got to post guards at the border or boundary of temptation, long before the full-scale invasion has begun." In other words, you've got to patrol even what appear to be passing or pastime pleasures.

This, I've come to understand, is what Jesus is saying to us in our text from Matthew 5. At first glance, Christ's words sound absolutely draconian: **If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away... 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. (Mat 5:29-30)** An early church father named, Origen, took Jesus' words at face value here and literally castrated himself, only to discover that he still had challenges with lust. Origen came to realize that his deepest problem wasn't with his part, but with his heart.

Jesus is not advocating self-mutilation here. But he is telling us that few things so affect our reason and emotions as what our eyes fix upon and our hands touch. Your eyes and hands are like sentries that can keep powerful ideas and images from crawling their way so deep into your camp that your heart is conquered by them. If your eyes and hands are failing in that function, says Jesus -- if they are actually bringing the enemy in -- then what measures ARE you going to take to redeploy them?

It may sound a little medieval, but Doug Weiss, one of the nation's leading experts on handling compulsion and addictions suggests that people struggling in this area wear a rubber band around their wrists. When you find your eye or your hands straying in the direction of trouble, he give the rubber band a good snap. One friend who uses that technique says: "*I find that the pain produced helps me forget about the pleasures I was contemplating!*" The Desert Fathers of ancient Christianity called this technique, "mortification of the flesh." It can certainly be taken too far, as Origen found out, but what measures WILL we use to guard our reason and emotions?

I know a person who's learned to throw out the catalogues as soon as they come into the house and to turn off the advertisements, because she found her heart being invaded by desires for things and more things. I know a guy who's taught himself not to even turn on the television when he's away on business, because he knows the desires it's going to feed. I've learned that I have to turn off the morning radio programs because I find that the incredibly crass and cruel way people speak of others there simply affects my heart toward others.

What are the measures you take to patrol the pleasures offered at the perimeter of your life? Maybe even more helpfully, what are the ideas and images that you are replacing the destructive ones with? That's the function of the spiritual disciplines we've commended in this series. The disciplines offer us a way to gainfully deploy our reason and emotions in a manner that builds the strength and health of our heart. The Apostle Paul says: **Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me--put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you. (Phil 4:8-9)**

Maybe, however, we're not really all that interested in peace. A titillated, adrenaline-rush life feels better. Perhaps, we're not all that motivated to pursue a life that is noble, pure, lovely, or admirable. A life like everyone else is fine with us. The Apostle James says: **Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. (Jas 5:16)** But maybe we'd just like forgiveness for our obsessions, not healing. If so, let's just keep doing what we've been doing with our eyes and our hands. And while we're at it, look at that guy Jesus over there, will you? Can you believe his nerve in telling us to patrol our pleasures? ***Let's just crucify him.***

¹ Mark 10:13-16

² Matthew 4:18-22

³ Luke 10:38

⁴ Luke 19

⁵ Luke 15:21-24

⁶ Luke 23:39-43

⁷ Revelation 21:1-5

⁸ Luke 15:1-7

⁹ Luke 14:21-23

¹⁰ Luke 22:15

¹¹ John 15:11

¹² Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting On the Character of Christ*.