



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Gospel of Matthew

“Jesus on the Sins of Our Age,” Matthew 5:21-32 – TRANSCRIPT

We are reading through Matthew and attempting to expound it as we go along, and we have reached chapter 5 and verse 21, and we want to read for our Scripture reading for today through verse 32. Matthew chapter 5 verse 21 through verse 32,

“Ye have heard that it was said of them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift. Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the

uttermost farthing. Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart. And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.”

Incidentally, in that last verse, it seems to be very unfair as read according to the Authorized verse, “But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery.” The construction in the Greek text may just as well be rendered, “causeth her to be stigmatized as an adulteress,” regarded as such. Or, it may be rendered, “Puts her into the position where she might fall into adultery.” It seems a great deal truer to the general tenor of this words and probably is the way that it should be rendered.

Our subject for today is “Jesus on the Sins of Our Age.” Looming large in any listing of the sins of our age would be the sins of murder, of adultery, and of divorce. And I think it is the special sin of the new morality that it has attempted to make these sins respectable. The term, “the New Morality” is the term given to the ethics of men such as Bishop John Robinson of *Honest to God* fame, of Joseph Fletcher, of the Lutheran

Martin Marty, of the Baptist Harvey Cox and the Presbyterian Robert Wood Lynn. They have taught with varying emphases that right and wrong can’t be legislated. That is, legislated in a once and for all code that fits every situation.

According to these theologians and others who have followed their teaching, which has filtered down into most of the pulpits of mainline Protestantism throughout America, God has not issued a moral code. We are therefore to be subject to the one rule of love. What this simple law demands in each particular situation is right. That, of course, is a code, but the New Morality theologians do not regard it as a once and for all code that fits every situation in the sense that Protestants in general, and Roman Catholics also, have considered the moral code of the Bible to be a code. Therefore, the New Morality has been often called “situation ethics.”

According to this code, adultery and other sins may, if the situation is right, be perfectly acceptable. The popularity of the New Morality is manifested in many, many ways. It is manifested most notably, perhaps, in the phenomenal success of Hugh Hefner’s enterprises, which have grossed millions catering to the hedonistic appetite of the United States. In fact, the sexual revolution that has taken place in the United States in the past ten or fifteen years¹ – that is, the degree of sexual revolution that has taken place then – has been immeasurably aided by the ethics of the New Morality.

When one looks at the presuppositions of the New Morality, one gains an insight into what really lies back of the things they are saying. And they have not been reticent about the bases upon which they view their system of morality. For example, they have said very plainly and publicly that their morality is based upon the philosophy of pragmatism. It is based also upon relativism. They have said it is based upon positivism and personalism. All of these principles, particularly as interpreted by these eminent theologians, are utterly opposed to the biblical presupposition of the Christian life.

¹ This series of messages on the Gospel of Matthew were preached during 1976

Christians ground all of their faith upon the presupposition that we have in holy Scripture a divine revelation. That is our principium, to use a philosophical expression and a theological expression. We rest upon the principium that the holy Scriptures are a divine revelation and give us all that is necessary for faith and practice.

They rest their faith upon the presuppositions of pragmatism and relativism and positivism and personalism. And so it’s a battle of presuppositions, and we think ours are better. And we think also that there is in evidence in the Christian faith, down through the centuries, there is untold evidence of the fact that they are the better presuppositions.

There are some particular errors that arise out of the New Morality. It is antinomian in the final analysis. It also in itself represents a failure to define love in the Christian sense. There is no specific relationship of love to the redemption that is in Christ and the blood that he shed on the cross for the sins of sinners. And it is also Pelagian, because lying underneath it is the idea that we of ourselves are able to do things that please God. So it has a weak concept of sin. It has no real, true concept of redemption, and the results are an ethics that are contrary to the teaching of holy Scripture, and contrary to the good of man.

The Lord Jesus, in the section that we are going to look at this morning, gives us a sure word, and it is diametrically opposed to the pagan principles of modern society. There are, in the section that remains in chapter 5, six antitheses which have come from the Lord Jesus. These antitheses are in contrast between the true teaching of Scripture and the Pharisaic tradition of his day which was upon their understanding of the Old Testament.

So that what he does in the section that begins at verse 21 and does not conclude until verse 28, is to expound the true meaning of God’s moral law as set forth in the Old Testament writings, which, remember, were for the apostles and our Lord Jesus, the word of God. Now you can see these antitheses very simply by noticing several of the verses. Verse 21 begins, “Ye have heard,” and then there follows the contrast in verse 22, “But I

say unto you.” And then in verse 27 we read, “But ye have heard,” and in verse 28, “But I say unto you.” And then in verse 32, “Ye have heard,” and in verse 34, “But I say unto you.” Verse 39, “But I say unto you,” and finally, in verse 44, the final antithesis, “But I say unto you.” So in six antitheses he contrasts the true understanding of the Scriptures with the Pharisaic and scribal traditions of the day, to which most of his listeners have been exposed.

The impression steals over one, as you listen to the words of our Lord, that he is one who teaches with supreme authority. I’m not at all surprised that when the sermon is completed, Matthew adds the words in verse 28 and 29 of chapter 7, “And when it came to pass that Jesus had entered these things, the people were astonished at his doctrine, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes.”

Someone has said – a student of this particular passage in the New Testament – Jesus understands the Old Testament better than the Old Testament itself. That’s not true. But you see, people are exposed to interpretations of the Old Testament, and evidently that person who made that statement had himself been exposed to certain interpretations of the Old Testament, and when he heard our Lord’s interpretation, he did say, Jesus understands the Old Testament better than the Old Testament itself, that is in accordance with the interpretations of it that I have heard.

You can notice in the styles of Scriptural interpreters certain ordered facts. For example, in the case of the prophets of the Old Testament, they frequently punctuated the things that they said with, “Thus saith the Lord.” They set themselves forth as those who were true representatives of Yahweh in heaven. “Thus saith the Lord,” and so hundreds of times in the Old Testament the prophet says, “Thus saith the Lord.” They wanted to give the impression that the teaching they were giving was not teaching that came from themselves, but that it came from God. “No prophecy of Scripture springs from its own unfolding, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the holy Spirit,” Peter said. They said, “Thus saith the Lord.”

And when the scribes came along and things had become much deader in Israel, and apostasy had taken place, they did not speak with authority. They said – and they punctuated their statements with phrases like this: “Rabbi so-and-so said such-and-such.” “Rabbi so-and-so says this and that,” and “Rabbi someone else says thus-and-thus,” or “There is a teaching that,” and so the people of our Lord’s day were used to the citation of authorities – one on side and the others on the other side. And generally speaking, the people were divided up into the followers of Rabbi Hileo or Rabbi Shemi. And, so they heard, constantly, there is a teaching that Rabbi so-and-so says this.

The Lord Jesus comes on the scene. And he says, “It has been said by those of old, such-and-such, but I say unto.” He gave the impression that he spoke out of a self-authenticating authority. He spoke as if he himself were authoritative in what he said, and the people responded to it by saying, he does speak as one who has authority, and not as the scribes.

There is a measure of that even today. You can tell when preachers come into the pulpit whether they’re speaking of the authority that the Holy Spirit gives, or whether they are speaking out of human authority. There is always an aura about it. You can always tell it. I can sit in the audience, and I can hear a man preach, and I can say, “Now that was a message that came from the Holy Spirit.” And oftentimes, I may hear a message that even in its words might not be too bad, but there is just something missing that lets you know it does not really come from God.

Now when the Lord Jesus preached, the impression stole over the people that it was from God. It has been by said by those who have been in the presence of Mr. Toscanini that whenever that great conductor came on the stage, there was a sense of his own personal authority that came over the musicians that were there.

And I read a story of the trip of Sir Wilfred Grenfell, the great missionary to Labrador, who once was crossing the Atlantic with a man who knew him. And the man said afterwards whenever Sir Wilfred came in one of the public rooms of the ship, there

was a sense of his own personal authority that came over the people who were in the room. He said, “As a matter of fact, I could tell when he came in the room without even looking up.” I felt his presence; he was a man of God.

Now the Lord Jesus speaks as one who has authority. There are three questions he takes up here in the section that we have read. There is the question of murder, there is the question of adultery, and there is the question of divorce. Now we won’t spend a whole lot of time on divorce, because later on, in the 19th chapter, the Lord Jesus will say a great deal more about that subject than he does here, so we’ll save the larger part of the teaching on that subject for the 19th chapter. That is, if we’re able to be there many months from now when we reach, I presume, the 19th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew.

But today we want to stress these two, murder and adultery, and deal only briefly – for he only gives us a brief word or two – concerning the question of divorce. We turn, first, to the question of murder. Incidentally, that opening phrase or two, “ye have heard that it was said by them of old,” may also be translated, “Ye have heard that it was said *to them* of old.” But I prefer the rendering of the Authorized Version, because it seems a better contrast with the words of our Lord that follow.

Ye have heard that it was said *by* them of old. Now he does not mean by this, “you have heard that it was said by Moses or by the Scriptural writers.” He means the ancient teachers that his readers and his listeners would have heard: “You have heard that it was said by them of old,” by the teachers of antiquity, and for them it meant the Rabbinic tradition. You have heard that they have said, “Thou shalt not kill, and whosoever should kill shall be in danger of judgment.” The tradition, then, says, no murder.

But unfortunately, the traditionists had, by combining Numbers chapter 35 and verse 30 with the Sixth Commandment, “thou shalt not kill,” had come to the teaching that the only thing that that Sixth Commandment had meant was that a physical life should not be taken. That was the teaching that was given. In other words, if a person avoided the

taking of physical life of another person, then he was not guilty of violation of the Sixth Commandment. The Lord Jesus will throw a wrench into that interpretation.

He says, “But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother...shall be in danger of the judgment.” To avoid murder physically is not enough. The law goes beyond the overt act. Now he sets forth three degrees. He says, “Whoever is angry with his brother...shall be in danger of judgment, and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca,”—now, I must make a confession.

I mispronounced a word last Sunday in this hour. I’m sorry. It’s not often that I do this. [Laughter] Three times in my life, I’ve mispronounced words: once, in 1939, once another time that I don’t remember, and once last Sunday at 12 o’clock. Now, it was the word “serif,” I kept saying serif [pronounced sehr-EEF], speaking about that little line below the i, translated “title” here in verse 18, for example. Now unfortunately – I wouldn’t say anything about this because my pronunciation is so authoritative – that the whole publishing industry this week has transformed its pronunciation of this word, the advertising industry, the printing business, they’re all saying serif because somebody came and said, Dr. Johnson said it was serif.

But I want to assure you that the correct pronunciation is SEHR-if, and not sehr-EEF. And I am indebted to someone in the audience who is here this morning. Now, he doesn’t have a gun on me; I’m saying this of my own free will [loud laughter]. I don’t believe in free will, but I’m saying it of my own free will [sustained laughter]. I want to say that last Sunday morning I should have known better, because he was sitting in the audience, and I happened to look down at him, and he was saying [gestures, followed by loud, sustained laughter]. He was trying to help me, but I didn’t pay him a bit of attention. He buttonholed me afterwards and laid down the law, and I want you to know the correct pronunciation is SEHR-if and not sehr-EEF. May I never err again. [Laughter]

Now, I have said here, Raca [pronounced RAY-ka], because that’s the way it’s pronounced in my edition of the King James Version, so I’m going to call it, Ray-ka. And

the Lord Jesus then says, “Whosoever says to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council,” and then the third degree, “but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.” It is evident from these words that the Lord Jesus is trying to tell his listeners that to break the Sixth Commandment, it is not necessary to kill someone physically. One may simply be angry with them; that is, an inward anger.

That word, incidentally, means an inveterate anger, a kind of slow-burn that an individual has with reference to someone else, so that if we are angry at a brother, which means, in this context, an Israelite. Incidentally, this is another indication of the fact that these verses are intended by their primary interpretation to apply to when our Lord Jesus was upon the earth.

And then the second thing that he denounces is an unexpressed contempt in which an individual speaks of another person as Raca. That is, he has an attitude toward him that he is a Raca, which means a kind of brainless idiot, a bonehead, a blockhead. It would mean the same thing when we say, “that knucklehead.” So if one says something like that, then he says he shall be guilty and in danger of the council.

And then the final one, the expressed abuse of “fool” is an attack on the moral character of an individual. So you can see that what our Lord is saying is that if we are to keep the Sixth Commandment, it’s not enough to avoid the physical act of murder. We must avoid unexpressed anger. We must avoid the expression of a term like Raca. We must avoid the expression of a term like fool.

Now of course, who can possibly keep a commandment like this? Not many of you in this audience, I can imagine, are guilty of murder in the physical sense—probably not a single one of you.

But when it comes to the Sixth Commandment as taught by our Lord Jesus, the chances are not a single person in this audience would dare raise their hands and say, “I have kept this commandment.” I won’t waste time by giving you an opportunity giving

you a public profession of how you have kept it perfectly, but you can see that the result of this is to condemn every one of us. We have broken the Sixth Commandment.

Now the Lord Jesus and the Apostle Paul and the writers of Scripture all agree that the purpose of the Mosaic law is to bring us to the conviction that we are sinners. Paul says in Romans chapter 3 and verse 20, “By the law is the full knowledge of sin.” That’s the reason those commandments were given; not to bring us to faith in Christ or salvation, because they cannot do that. They simply condemn us. They show us what we are. So the Lord Jesus is giving us the biblical interpretation of the commandments, and O how much deeper it is than the interpretation of the scribes and the Pharisees. He said that he came not to destroy the law or the prophets, but to fulfill them, to give the deepest meaning of them is included in that statement, and that is what he is doing here.

It’s evident, then, that our Lord condemns all unlove. It’s not surprising that when one asks him, what is the greatest commandment?, he will reply later, why, the greatest commandment is “thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart with all thy mind with all thy soul,” and then the next is, “thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” Who can keep commandments like that? They condemn every one of us. And if they condemn every one of us, they simply prove to us that we need the redemption he has accomplished upon the cross at Calvary.

There is another thing that appears here, and that is that the Lord Jesus believed in hell. We’re often told that it’s very unscientific and unscholarly to preach hellfire and damnation. Hellfire and damnation preachers are generally regarded as a throwback to the age of the Puritans, or some age even farther back than theirs. But our Lord Jesus was a preacher of hellfire and damnation. And furthermore, he was a unique one. Of the thirteen times that the word Gehenna, which is the word for hellfire (it is the word for the lake of fire), of the thirteen times that that word appears in the New Testament, all but one of them are upon the lips of the Lord Jesus. Only once is that term ever used by

anyone else. And the chances are that James in chapter 3 verse 6 of his epistle learned it from the Lord Jesus.

[Indistinct] in one of his poems says, “The fount of love, his servants’ sins to tell love’s deeds / himself reveals the sinners’ hell.” So this is a peculiar and distinctive word of the Lord Jesus: hellfire.

Joseph Parker was a great preacher of a generation or two ago, and he was once speaking about Sodom and Gomorrah and expatiating on the necessity of divine judgment. And in one of his flights of oratory – he was known for that – speaking of Sodom he said, “Remonstrate with wicked Sodom? Absurd. Threaten with wicked Sodom? Feeble. What then; rain fire and brimstone upon it? Yes. Conscience says yes, justice says yes, concern for the other cities nearby says yes. Nothing but fire will disinfect so foul an air. Nothing but burning brimstone should succeed the cup of devils.” Hellfire is a necessary biblical teaching.

Someone once said, there may be heaven; there must be a hell, demanded by the very facts of human history. The Lord Jesus is the greatest teacher of hellfire, and we know that is therefore divine revelation.

Now the illustrations that follow are intended to show us that the law of love is better than sacrifice. He says, for example, in verse 23, “If thou bring thy gift”—that is, an offering—“to the altar, and you’ll remember that your brother has something against you”—notice it’s not you have something against your brother, but if you should remember that your brother has something against you; you may even be the innocent party—“you must leave there your gift before the altar (do not offer it), go and first be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your offering.” Your offering will not be accepted as long as you know that your brother has something against you which has not yet been set right by a mutual reconciliation between the two of you. In other words, postpone the sacrifice rather than the reconciliation.

Now the Lord Jesus spoke with authority, and he intended that this principle be applied throughout the experiences of all believers, whether they lived in that age or in this age.

And finally, the second illustration that he gives, “Agree with thine adversary quickly” lets us know that the time for this reconciliation is now. Do it quickly. Incidentally, in those days, it was entirely possible for those two people to go to the judge arm in arm. Today, we go arm in arm with our lawyers and meet our adversaries in the court. But then, they did go with one another. And here, he speaks of that situation. And agree with your adversary quickly. And the lesson is, the law of love is better than sacrifice, and your sacrifices will not be accepted as long as you harbor within your heart that enmity against the brother.

The second question that he raises is the question of adultery. This question is the most relevant to our society. Our society’s standards in the 20th Century are certainly not the standards of the Lord Jesus. In the Bible we are taught two things about the relationship between the sexes. You can put them down very simply: chastity before marriage, fidelity after marriage. Those two principles govern the relationship between the sexes according to Scripture. Chastity before marriage, fidelity afterwards.

Now this particular standard is attacked by almost everything that we have in our society today. It is attacked by the mass media and the lure of, not only the programs, but even the commercials that appear upon our television screens.

We have our television screens filling our living rooms with sex-filled advertisements, even for toothpaste—gives your mouth sex appeal. I went out and bought some of that. [Laughter] I wondered, what in the world could be in toothpaste that could give your mouth sex appeal? [More laughter] Shaving cream: take it off, take it all off, so we’re told. And even detergents are called, “the stripper” [laughter]. So you see, that even the things that appear on our screens arise out of those mass media men’s knowledge of the fact that it is that thing that attracts the society of which we are apart.

Now the mass media are not wholly to blame. There is the Playboy philosophy, which we have pointed to, which rests upon certain other philosophical bases that are extremely weak. There is the New Morality from the philosophical and theological standpoint also. And, of course, there is also the ignorance of the word of God.

But therefore, in the light of these things, our Lord’s words on adultery are certainly to the point. He says in the 27th verse, “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old, Thou shalt not commit adultery.” That sounds very lovely, so far as it goes, and so far as it goes, it is an effective statement of the Seventh Commandment: thou shalt not commit adultery. But unfortunately, the scribes and the Pharisees so interpreted this as to weaken its true force. They interpreted it as the avoidance of the physical act of intercourse.

But God intended something far deeper than that. You see, he deals with the heart; always the heart, always the inmost part of a man. And so even the commandment, “thou shalt not commit adultery,” may be taught in such a way that it becomes an untruth in that it does not fully express the mind of God.

In the Jewish law, and in the Jewish tradition, through the tradition the commandments of the Old Testament were reduced to a somewhat manageable group of about 618—I’ve forgotten the exact number; I didn’t put it in my notes—about 618 precepts, of which a great number, 340 or 50-something were negative, and about 250 or so were positive.

In the 35th precept of these 618, which are a kind of summary which the law of Moses is supposed to have taught, the 35th precept of the law reads that no man lie with another man’s wife. Now you can see from that statement that what is meant is the physical act alone. No man lie with another man’s wife. It is this that our Lord Jesus corrects and deepens.

“But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.” In other words, the Lord Jesus says it’s

not sufficient, so far as the keeping of the Seventh Commandment is concerned, to avoid the physical act of intercourse. The look with the intention of lust is just as much as a breaking of that commandment as the physical act. And we all know how true it is. For we would do it, if there were not considerations that keep us from it outside of ourselves.

Now it’s very important that we read this, “I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her”—I do not think that what is meant by this is that men should avoid looking at women. What is not meant, of course, is that we should avoid any expression of the sex instinct that has been put within us by God. What is meant is with the intention of lust. To look to lust. And you’ll notice that’s the way he puts it: whosoever looketh on a woman *to* lust after her flesh. I do not think that what is meant is that a man cannot admire the physical appearance of a woman, but it is the look with the intent of lusting after her that the Lord Jesus speaks about.

Guy King, a very well-known British Bible teacher of the last generation has written in one of his books, “When on one occasion I asked a children’s meeting, what’s the difference between temptation and sin, a little boy replied, ‘Please, temptation’s when you’re asked to do it, and sin’s when you’ve done it.’” And Martin Luther’s expressed this in another way, “We cannot prevent the birds flying over our heads, but we can prevent them from making nests in our hair.” So, what the Lord Jesus speaks about here is the look with the intent of lusting.

One of the strange things in our society is that we have fallen for the opinion that the Victorians were the cause of a great deal of sexual immorality in their day, and the answer to the sex problem is to reveal everything that can be revealed about sex, and to bring it out into our discussion and into our life as we have done.

The striking thing about this is that we have done this through the 20th Century, and what has happened? Well, of course, what has happened has been that in our society, we have had more and more of sexual immorality as a result of our exposure of all aspects of sex.

C.S. Lewis, in one of his writings, has made some very sharp comments with reference to this. He has commented upon the fact that in our 20th Century, that is precisely what we have done. We have not hushed up sex. We have discussed it, and we have discussed it fully. We have brought it into our radio and our TV and into our common life. It’s in our schools and everywhere else in the fullest degree. And he says, “But the result has been that we have more divorce, more perversions of sex, more illegitimacy – two to four times as much in 1940 in spite of the pill.”

And then he goes on to—and of course, all of us know that people are flocking to the marriage counselors and to the ministers to unscramble the ruin that they have made of their lives. And the great thing that men are having to deal with is the sexual immorality that exists in our human society. And, it is in the church of Jesus Christ, and furthermore, it is in the evangelical church in a very deep way—no question about it.

But Mr. Lewis made a very interesting comment. He says, “It is probably the other way around. It is not that the Victorians hushed it up and thus erred. He says it’s probably the other way around, “The human race hushed up sex originally because it had become such a mess. And if things become bad enough in our day, this hushing up of sex may well be reverted to again as the present Playboy age gives way to a new Victorianism.” So in his opinion, he thought that perhaps the Victorians hushed up any discussion of sex not because that was bad and caused disorders, but because the disorders were so bad in the previous societies that they hushed it up in defense against it.

Well, I’m not sure exactly about that, of course, because that’s something for someone who knows a great deal more about that subject to expatiate upon than I. The Lord Jesus says, “Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.” The cure, you see, follows in the words that the Lord Jesus gives about the right eye and the right hand. And for him, the chore is self-abdication.

In the Apostle Paul’s writings, there are two statements that I think bear on what our Lord is speaking about here. Incidentally, the Lord Jesus is speaking symbolically, here. He does not mean that you are to pluck out your right eye; if your right eye offends you, you’ll use your left eye, of course [laughter]. He is talking symbolically. He’s trying to say that that which is most necessary to you, if it is offensive, you should take the most extreme measures to prevent the sin from taking place.

The Apostle Paul, in two passages, says some very significant words to young people. He says, in 1 Corinthians chapter 6 and verse 18, “Flee fornication.” In his words of advice to Timothy he says, “Flee youthful lusts.” There are times when it is proper for us to flee, and Joseph is a beautiful illustration of this in the Old Testament. Now what that means, my young friends, particularly – and some of you older ones, too – what that means very practically is if you find yourself in an apartment, alone with a member of the opposite sex, and the passions begin to rise, get out of the apartment! That’s what that means. It means that if you find yourself parked in an automobile with a member of the opposite sex, and the passions begin to arise, turn on the ignition and leave that place. That’s what our Lord means and that’s what Paul means. And doing that, God enables you by the Holy Spirit to escape the sin of fornication.

Of course, the cure for all of these sinful perversions of sex that exist in our society and in the church is a right view of Christian marriage. Marriage has been instituted by God. It is a divine institution. It is he who said that Adam needed a helpmeet, and that he would make one for Adam. It is he who said that when two people are joined together, they become one flesh.

Isn’t it a striking thing that the Bible sets forth an individual as being a trichotomous individual? In that sense, we correspond to the Trinity. But we are a person who has a body, a soul, and a spirit. And since we have a body and a soul and a spirit, our relationship to the opposite sex should exist in each one of these spheres. We should

have a bodily relationship to the opposite sex, and in Christian marriage, we have that relationship, and that relationship involves a relationship of sex.

God has implanted the desire. It is to be used for the glory of God and for the benefit of the program that he has instituted down through the centuries, and so the relationship that exists between two people is not a satisfactory relationship if it is not a relationship of the body.

But it also must be a relationship of the soul. Now, in the relationship of the soul, we have the relationship of the emotions, and the intellectual attainments, and the feelings, and also the cultures of the individuals involved. It’s a very unwise thing for a man to marry a woman, or a woman to marry a man when the association and the attraction is purely physical. Those things ultimately wane. There are deeper things. There are relationships of the things that we like that make for companionship. And so the relationship must be a relationship that touches the soul.

That’s why young people, young girls, when they think about the one they are going to marry, they think about father, often. I hoped that my daughter thought about me when she looked for someone to marry. I hoped that she thought enough of me to do that. And young men often think of mother. Now, of course they generally have a much broader image. Keith Miller, who wrote the bestselling book, *Taste of New Wine*, said that when he thought of someone he was going to marry, he thought of a combination of St. Theresa, Elizabeth Taylor and Betty Crocker. [Boisterous laughter] Now I don’t know whether he found this or not. [Sustained laughter] There does have to be a relationship of the soul.

But even above the relationship of the body and the soul, there must be the relationship of the two spirits. And the spirit is that part of the being with which we have fellowship with God. And we cannot have a successful marriage if we do not have a union that touches the body and the soul and the spirit. That’s why it’s so important for

you to marry, as Paul says, in the Lord. That’s the happy marriage: marriage that touches body, soul and spirit.

Well now, finally, there is the question of divorce, and I want to say just a few words about it before we close. “It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement.” Theoretically, no nation had a higher view of marriage than Israel. In the Old Testament, God said, “I hate divorce.” The Rabbi said, “the very altar sheds tears when a man divorces the wife of his youth.” The law is expressed, whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement. The Rabbis stressed the giving of the writing of divorcement. The Lord Jesus stresses the putting away of the wife. The tradition says conditional divorce, with emphasis on writing a bill of divorcement.

The Jews were divided over this. Rabbi Shanai and his followers said that the interpretation of some uncleanness which a man found in his wife according to Deuteronomy chapter 24 meant that the only basis upon which divorce could take place was adultery. On the other hand, the followers of Rabbi Hileo were much broader. They were more modern. They said that a man could divorce his wife if she put too much salt on his food, if she uncovered her head in the streets, or if she let his food burn.

Now that can never happen today, because of frozen foods [laughter], but in those days it could happen. Someone has said the greatest danger to the modern housewife in the kitchen today comes from frostbite. [Laughter] And we no longer say when we come home, “What’s cooking?” but, “What’s thawing?” [Laughter] A young man said, “My wife’s cooking melts in your mouth; she never lets it thaw enough before she puts it on the table.” [More laughter]

Now the Lord Jesus, it’s evident, stands on the side of those who are extremely strict. He says, “But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication (we’ll deal with this more thoroughly when we get to chapter 19 a few months from now), causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her

that is divorced committeth adultery.” They greatly exaggerated the importance of the exception, and made it easy for divorce to take place. He stresses the principle, and the principle is: God hates divorce. And his answer is a much deeper interpretation of the law concerning divorce as it was practiced in the Nation Israel.

Well, there is a sense of unworthiness that comes over one when one looks at our Lord’s interpretation of the law. And that was intentional. It is the expression of the will of God, and the reason that there comes over us this sense of unworthiness and inability to carry out the law is for the simple reason that we are sinners, all of us. And therefore, we lie under divine condemnation. And even in the giving of the true interpretation of the moral law, there should have come over your heart the conviction, I could never keep the law myself.

And if that has come over you, then you are a fit candidate for the redemption that is in Christ, by which he delivers from sin and condemnation through the shedding of his blood, and offers you the enabling power of the Holy Spirit, who, as you rest upon him, enables you to please God in a life that glorifies the Son of God. We stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] We are grateful to Thee, Lord, for these words of instruction that have come from our Lord Jesus, and they have brought home to us our own inability to keep the divine moral principles.

We praise Thee that Thou hast brought us to a conviction of sin, and we do ask, O God, that if there be some here who have not yet fled to Christ, because of that solemn sense of condemnation, that they may do so at this moment.

We praise Thee that he has offered a redemption that is sufficient for the sins of all who are here, and we pray that through the Spirit Thou wilt work in hearts to bring to Christ.

And now may grace, mercy and peace go with us as we part.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.

“Jesus on the Sins of Our Age” by S. Lewis Johnson
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