

PURITY

MATTHEW 5: 27-28

Women in the Bible Series

OPENING PRAYER

Loving God, We thank you for our bodies and for the gift of sexuality and we ask for your guidance as we explore Jesus' teachings in this area.

In the spirit of Jesus, Amen.

EXEGESIS

This passage has been used for centuries to make people feel bad about sex - not just bad about unethical sex, but negative about sexuality altogether. Was Jesus negative about sex? What does it mean to look at a woman "with lust"? Other translations include "with a view to lusting after her" and "with a hope of sex".

This line follows Jesus' comment comparing anger to murder. As Jesus himself was angry on occasion, he was probably thinking of the sort of anger that you dwell on and wilfully maintain. It therefore seems likely that 'lust' is similarly not an instinctive feeling but a developed desire.

William Countryman, a scholar of New Testament ethics, argues that, both here and elsewhere, Jesus was dismissing purity rules, by which someone became sinful or dirty solely because of a physical act. Instead, "the purity of 'the heart' is the only thing that counts".

Sexual desire is common to all societies, but Jesus was not talking only about sex. He was also talking about power. All too often, it is women who are blamed for men's sexual sins. In Jesus' day, women were blamed for being a temptation. The tendency continues. Research by Amnesty International in 2005 found that over a quarter of British adults believe that a woman who wears "sexy or revealing clothing" is partly to blame if she is raped. Victim-blaming often happens in cases of sexual abuse, when the victim has less power than the perpetrator: because she is a woman, because he or she is a child, a migrant, poor or less well respected than the abuser. In this context, Jesus told men that they are responsible for how they behave sexually towards women. They cannot blame the woman for tempting them. If they develop adulterous feelings in their hearts, they have committed adultery.

In Jesus' day, adultery was often seen as a property crime – the theft of another man's wife. Some argue that Jesus' comment is simply Jesus protecting men's property rights. But Jesus had little regard for possessions and was often encouraging people to give them up. He also had too much respect for women to see them as mere 'property'. It seems more likely that Jesus' redefinition of adultery was about the rights of women and the need for everyone to take responsibility for their actions and thoughts.

REFLECTION

Is it only men who need to take this teaching on board? Many see Jesus' comment as a criticism of the objectification of women. In a society in which sexism is still rife, it can be argued that this remains the most important aspect of this teaching. We can also read it as a challenge to everyone to take responsibility for how they express themselves sexually – in thoughts, desires and actions. This can be done only if we take questions of power into account, whether men's power over women, one individual's influence over another or the privileges enjoyed by certain groups but denied to others. We can reflect on the "purity of the heart", perhaps by avoiding a narrow focus on rules about sexual acts and thinking more about the values and intentions of those involved. However, there are dangers with this approach too. Whatever conclusion we draw, Jesus' short comment here is a reminder that we cannot think about sexual ethics without thinking about power and how we – or others – use it. As the theologian Stanley Hauerwas puts it, "Any sex ethic is a political ethic".

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What influences your reaction to this passage? Is your response affected by your gender, relationship status, sexual orientation, sexual experience (or inexperience) or by whether you have experienced sexual abuse or harassment?
2. Are you persuaded that we need to think about power relations to understand Jesus' comment? Is this point overstated?

CLOSING PRAYER

We are sorry that we have not always used our sexuality in life-giving ways. Help us to resist both negativity about sexuality and the temptation to use it in unhealthy ways. May our sexuality, and the rest of our lives, glorify you, our God. In the love of Jesus, Amen.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Sarah Bessey, *Jesus Feminist: God's radical notion that women are people too* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2013)
- William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed and Sex: Sexual ethics in the New Testament and their implications for today* (SCM Press, 2011)
- Symon Hill, *The Upside-Down Bible: What Jesus really said about money, sex and violence* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2015)