

Basic Training: Fully Committed
By Jason Huff
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Malachi 2:13-16; Colossians 3:1-6; Matthew 5:27-37

Friends, our final Scripture reading today comes from Matthew 5:27-37. Let's listen together to the Word of God. "[Jesus taught,] "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. It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery. Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' But I tell you, do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.'"

We live in a commitment-phobic era. People still believe in God, but fewer join churches. Fewer and fewer get married, and it happens at 30 instead of 20 or 25. People don't RSVP to parties because something else might come up. We have problems committing because there are so many choices. It leads to what experts call "decision fatigue." We make bad choices – like picking up a Snickers leaving the gas station – because we are exhausted from decision making. We all feel like Charlie Brown. When he was accused of being wishy-washy, he replied, "Why can't I change just a little bit? I'll be wishy one day, washy the next!"

But bad things happen when we don't fully commit. Ever been behind a driver who isn't sure where he's going, in two lanes, looking at his GPS? That may have been me. But how annoying! Potentially dangerous, too. Feelings are hurt when people wait to commit. And in our theme of "basic training," if a soldier doesn't fully commit to his task in wartime, people die. For society to function, some commitments have to hold fast.

As Jesus continues the Sermon on the Mount, we have three ideas right in a row, and one of these things is not like the others...at least on the surface. Jesus moves through the commandments; last week was murder, this week is adultery. Adultery and divorce are related to marriage. But then Jesus goes on oaths. Why is that? It's because in all three – adultery, divorce, and oaths -- Jesus attacks our lack of commitment.

Jesus takes the law concerning adultery and expands it to its fullest meaning. Jewish law said adultery was punishable by death. But Jesus says, "It goes deeper than that." Looking at a woman lustfully qualifies as adultery. While it can't be punished in the same way, the guilt before God is still there. The wording doesn't condemn seeing someone and being attracted to them; it's looking with the intent of lust. It's not the first glance but the second and third.

This expanded concept of adultery introduces a new wrinkle. Those of us who are already married took vows to forsake all others. To lust after someone else is to break that commitment in thought, if not in deed. But this new definition brings the unmarried into the equation. Before, someone who wasn't married couldn't commit adultery unless they got involved with a married person. But under Jesus' word, those who are unmarried still find themselves guilty when they look with lust.

The commitment here isn't one to a spouse. Instead, it's the commitment we have to God – the commitment to purity and to Him alone. Through the prophet Ezekiel, God described idolatry as lust – people lusted after idols and the things they thought they could get from other gods. The lust of an unmarried person is a lack of commitment to godliness.

Then we move to divorce. There were two prevailing views of divorce in Judaism – one that allowed for divorce in almost every situation, and one that said only adultery was grounds for divorce. Jesus sides with the latter, and He explains why. For a man to divorce his wife – the only kind of divorce at the time – causes her to commit adultery.

Our first reaction is, “huh?” But remember what we learned last week: causing someone else to sin is far worse than sinning yourself. In that era, to avoid becoming destitute, a woman needed to be married after a certain age, especially if her father was dead. A divorced woman needed to remarry. This is adultery because it's not her first husband – but is the blame on her? No! It's on the man who divorced her. In fact, it's doubly bad because the husband who divorces his wife has the sin of two people on his head...hers and her new husband's.

Jesus is not condemning the woman or her new husband. This is just a fact of life; if it weren't, Jesus wouldn't say that adultery was an inevitable result. He's putting the weight of it on the one initiating the divorce. Jesus is going to the very heart of divorce – a lack of commitment. As Malachi said, it's a breaking of faith. Do things get rough? Are people cruel to each other in marriages? Sometimes. But commitments shouldn't be taken lightly. We wonder why Jesus doesn't make exceptions for abuse or neglect, but again, Jesus speaks in the light of commitment. Abuse and neglect break our marriage vows just as much as divorce does.

Oaths come next. In ancient society, without collateral, people took oaths promising to keep their word. There was a hierarchy of swearing! Jesus deals with it again in Matthew 23. You know how kids will swear and then cross their fingers behind their backs? They had a system all figured out that determined when you'd crossed your fingers and when you hadn't! Swear by the temple and you weren't bound; swear by the gold in the temple, and you were.

The hierarchy was devilish because the oaths made light of God. You swear by heaven or earth or Jerusalem and it doesn't count? You don't even have control over your own head to swear by it as collateral! Instead, Jesus says, “Let your yes be yes and your no be no.” Let your word be so good, be so trustworthy, keep your commitments so consistently, that nobody ever has to have you swear on anything to believe you. God's people are called to a level of reliability in their promises unheard of amongst anyone else.

And Jesus proves how serious He is about our commitments by His stunning teaching on avoiding sin. Got a problem with your eye causing you to sin? Your hand? Get rid of them. Better to avoid sin and lose a limb than to be thrown into hell with a full body. It's hyperbole, but this teaching makes us realize how lightly we take our commitments. Would any of us actually give an arm and a leg to stay true to the promises we've made? That's what Jesus is calling for metaphorically. He takes commitment to a whole new level.

What are we supposed to do with this? First, let's recognize what I call the beautiful broken record of Matthew's gospel: *we're all condemned by the Law, but all who trust Jesus are saved from our guilt*. If we didn't hear ourselves in Jesus' condemnation of anger last week, then we should hear ourselves in this passage. Our lack of commitment to God condemns us, whether we see that lack of commitment in our thought lives, not fully keeping our marriage vows, or even how poorly we honor our word. And we certainly aren't willing to do anything to keep our commitments; we'll barely inconvenience ourselves, let alone sacrifice something really important to stay faithful to our promises.

We'll keep hearing the broken record through Matthew – we are too far gone to save ourselves or be good enough for heaven. No wonder at the end of the Sermon on the Mount that we're told the people were astonished. The disciples all ask in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, "How can anyone be saved?" Jesus says, "With man, it's impossible. But with God, all things are possible."

And God does make it possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul summarizes it in Romans 8:1-5. It's so good we ought to hear the whole thing. "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit. Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires."

Those who believe in Him are free! The righteous requirements of the Law are met in Jesus and given to us through the Spirit! We do not have to sin any longer, and when we do, we have forgiveness through Jesus. What we celebrate at Easter in a few weeks is that Christ has overcome sin for us! We are broken, but in Christ, we are made whole. We are sinners, but we are saved by God's grace. We are guilty, but we are forgiven. If you have turned your life over to Him, then rejoice – and if you haven't, do it today!

The message doesn't end with freedom from guilt, though. As our reading today from Colossians told us, since our lives are hidden with God in Christ, we can set our minds on Him and get rid of the earthly things that plague us. We can't do it in our own power, but through the Holy Spirit within us, it can happen. *So first, this passage calls us to re-think our commitments.*

We are commitment-phobic in part because we are over-committed, often to things that don't make any difference. Just last weekend, I took Cameron to basketball, played in a racquetball tournament, led worship, and went to a fundraiser. Something should have given, probably the tournament. All those things were good things. But I was over-committed.

What commitments do we make that we shouldn't? We need to figure out what commitments are first priorities. We have our commitments to God – to be in relationship with Him, worshipping Him, reading His Scripture, communing with Him, praying. We have commitments to spouses, if we have them, and to our children. Then we have family, our parents and siblings, then our friends. We've got to get these in the right order. When we don't, we not only dishonor our commitments, we are sure to create long-term problems.

We all struggle with these. I spend a lot of time on the computer working on things for church, and some personal time too. But what's more important, my boys or social media? Spending time with Catha should be more important to me than finding out what's going on half a world away on CNN. Spending time in prayer is more important than whatever it is that is going to make my day so busy I think I'm going to have to skip it. The reality is, how I act in these personal commitments every day to God and my family is going to affect how likely I am to fall into the snares Jesus described.

Letting your yes be yes and your no means no means that sometimes we will have to say no, and that's really good. We've got to say no to some good things in order to make room for the great. As CrossWay grows, we have to re-think how good certain things are. Some weeks I have commitments to the church five nights – two studies, Session, worship, and youth group. God wants us to be growing relationships with people who aren't Christians, but I can't invite folks over for dinner if I am unavailable five nights out of seven; I need those other nights just to de-stress! Church commitments are good, but if they aren't the right commitments, they harm us. Life commitments are the same way. Say "no" enough that your "yes" means something.

And that leads us to our final thought: *when we commit, commit fully*. Whether it's in your purity with God or your relationship with your spouse or in your bonds with others, be bought in. Be sold out. Be so committed that nothing will stop you.

Our passage from Colossians is bold: "put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature." Don't knock it out; don't let it go unconscious only to get up again for round 2. Don't ignore it and pretend it isn't there. Put it to death. Sexual immorality? Kill it. Impurity? Destroy it. Lust? Demolish it? Evil desires and greed? Don't stop battling them until they are dead. Anything less will come back to bite us.

In early high school, I was at a big Christian conference for teens in Indianapolis, and they asked for commitments to purity. That day I pledged never to spend any money on pornography. That was all well and good for a few years. Then the Internet comes along and you can see pretty much anything you want, sacred or profane, for free, and I realized that my earlier commitment was nowhere near enough. I thought I'd killed a beast when I'd really just cut off its tail. Any sin must be put to death or it will come back angrier than before.

I don't know what in your life has only a partial commitment from you. Maybe it's God; maybe it's the church; maybe it's your marriage; maybe it's your family; maybe it's your friends; maybe it's your purity. But we will never succeed with only partial commitment. In Matthew 13, Jesus talks about different seeds that a farmer scatters, representing different people who hear the Word of God. Some love it, but when trouble or persecution comes, they fall away. Without full commitment, we will not be the fruitful, joyful Christ-followers God desires.

But there's something to remember about full commitment: it comes from our life with God, not our own willpower. The ironic thing about Jesus' teaching – which makes His point for Him about the Law – is that getting rid of an eye or a hand won't actually get rid of lust or any other sin. Sin is a matter of the heart. Now it is fantastic to cut off your access to temptation, but it doesn't fix the sin issue. I have filters on my computers so bad stuff doesn't get through – but it doesn't destroy lust, it only makes undesirable stuff less accessible. If your sin of choice is lusting after things and you cancel all your credit cards, it's a really wise move...but it doesn't stop your desire to accumulate, it only makes it more difficult.

Committing fully to God, to our spouses, to the genuinely important people in our lives...it requires God's intervention. I can't say, "I'm not going to lust or be angry today." I can't say, "I'm going to keep all my commitments." Because I'm a weak person. So are you. So are we all. But we are not sheep without a shepherd. We have one shepherd, the salvation of our souls, the Lord of all creation, the good shepherd who laid down His life for us, Jesus Christ.

When you commit, commit fully. Commit fully to your word, your commitments, the people you are pledged to, by going over and over again to the LORD. He will guide you and direct you. He will make pure what we cannot make pure. He will change our hearts and minds and wills. Just walk with Him. Just talk to Him. Just keep Him at the center of your gaze. As we will hear again in a couple of weeks, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and everything else will be given to you."

This is a tough passage. We can joke about anger, but lust and commitment and promises hit us a lot deeper. Those failures are painful. But we need not drown in our guilt. We are free. Colossians 3 says, "You have stripped off your old behavior with your old self, and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator." We are being renewed daily in our Lord and Savior. May our yes be yes and our no be no in every relationship we have. May we stay away from anything that would harm those relationships. As we turn to God anew each day, we will have the power. May we have the courage to live in that power that comes from Him and be fully committed to His ways.