

HOW BAD DO YOU WANT IT? MATTHEW 5:29-30

Here in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5:29-30, our Lord Jesus speaks strange words - at first glance, these are frightful words. But in this text we find **keys to victory** for people who want to overcome sin.

Jesus tells His disciples, **“If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.**

And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.”

In the year, 1050 AD, a Viking ship captain named Harriman O'Neil set his sights on Northern Ireland.

O'Neil was ambitious. He planned to sail to the island, launch a military conquest, and become its king.

The only problem with O'Neil's plan was that a rival Viking captain also hoped to one day rule Northern Ireland. To avoid a bloody conflict with a fellow Viking crew, O'Neil proposed a contest with his rival.

The first captain to sail to the northern shore of Ireland, and touch his hand down on Irish soil, would be entitled to press on and conquer the island.

Both captains sailed hard, and fought the winds the whole way. It was neck-and-neck across the high seas.

But as the Irish shore came into view the other Viking ship caught a gust of wind, and surged ahead of Harriman O'Neil. Captain O'Neil became alarmed.

He wanted Ireland badly, and he saw his opportunity slipping away... When the opposing captain boarded his rowboat to head to shore O'Neil became desperate.

He whipped out his knife, threw his hand up onto the rail of the ship, and then chopped off his hand. (**chop**)

From the deck of his ship, O'Neil threw his hand toward the shore. His bloody hand touched the ground just seconds before his rival stepped out of his boat.

O'Neil's hand was the first to touch Irish soil!

And O'Neil's colossal sacrifice won him the right to conquer Northern Ireland... His army was successful in battle, allowing he and his heirs ruled for many years.

Obviously, Harriman O'Neil was zealous for victory.

He wanted it really, really, really bad! And I want to challenge you with a question today... **How bad do you want it? How much do you desire spiritual victory?**

One day we're all going to stand before the God who created us - as well as the Lord and Savior who died to redeem us - and in that day, how bad do you want to hear the words, "**Well done good and faithful servant?**"

Do you want it as much as Harriman O'Neil wanted Northern Ireland? *Enough to chop off a hand, or even pluck out an eye?* How bad do you want to overcome sin, and be the person God desires you to be?

Let me read our text again to help it soak in...

“If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.”

It's tragic that over the years people have taken Jesus' words here literally. They've resorted to physical amputation to corral their sinful, lustful tendencies.

The early church leader, Origen of Alexandria, lived around 200 AD. According to church history, Origen literally emasculated himself - he chopped off his genitals - in an attempt to overcome sexual desire.

Enough men followed his lead that the Church at that time had to issue a decree outlawing such practices.

In the late 1800s a Scottish preacher named “*AJ Gossip*,” had a student who went stark raving mad. In a crazed state he cut off his hand with a razor blade.

When Gossip found the young man he was laughing, and shouting hysterically... “*I did right, I did right... (Now) I can look Jesus in the face.*” What an erroneous, tragic misunderstanding of these verses.

Understand, Jesus is using a literary device known as “*hyperbole*” - or *emphasis by exaggeration*. He's overstating the issue to dramatize a level of intensity.

Imagine a field goal kicker who blasts a 50 yard field goal through the uprights, with room to spare.

The announcer shouts, “**He kicked that ball right over the moon.**” Obviously, the football didn’t leave the stadium, let alone the earth’s atmosphere - *but all his listeners understood exactly what he meant...*

Likewise, we know what Jesus meant. He was using a figure of speech. We know Jesus spoke figuratively since a literal interpretation would’ve been pointless...

Gouge out your right eye, and you can still lust with your left eye!.. Chop off one hand and you can steal with the other hand!... In fact, if sin is in your heart, you can chop off both hands and sin with your nubs!

Physical amputation doesn’t alter an inner appetite.

At first glance this passage seems bizarre - but it really is packed with practical, workable, powerful *words of hope* for people who struggle with sin!

I want you to jot down four words - just four - tonight we’re keeping it simple. This is what I’m going to challenge you to do... **Recognize, Repent, Recruit, Rethink.** Here’re *the keys* for folks who long for victory!

Recognize... Repent... Recruit... Rethink...

First, if you want to overcome the sin in your life you need to **recognize** the root of your problems.

Notice, Jesus tells us, “**If your right eye causes you to sin...**” Then He says it again, “**If your right hand causes you to sin...**” Realize, in this text Jesus is telling us to identify and deal with the **cause** of our sin.

In verse 29 the word translated “*sin*” refers to the “*bait stick*.” The bait stick is the trigger that springs the trap. The mouse takes the bait, and trips the stick – *then that stick slams the life right out of the varmint*.

Jesus is asking, “*What is the cheese in your life?*” *What is it that sucks you in - sets you up - slams you?*”

For Superman it was kryptonite. Whenever he got near the rare, green mineral it robbed his strength - and turned him to goo... *What's your kryptonite?*

Money, ambition, booze, pornography, the horses, the skirts, video games... Some of us can do fine for days - then we take the bait - it trips the trap, and we're right back in the same mess we thought we'd escaped.

Hebrews 12:1 describes the cheese as “*the sin that so easily ensnares us*.” Jesus is asking, “*What is it?*”

Identify your cheese! Dealing with sin is like pulling weeds, if you don't get it by the root, it'll grow back.

To me one of the truly amazing facts about human anatomy is that a person can't smell his own *BO* or *bad breathe*. I could reek enough to knock a buzzard off a porta-potty - and yet, I'm usually the last one to know.

And the same is true with the sin in my life...

We develop huge blind spots. We see everyone's problems but our own. I'm always amazed at how skilled I am at shifting the blame and dodging responsibility. I'll tackle anything, *but the real issue*.

Recall, God told Balaam to go with the Midianites only under specific conditions... But his greed caused him to go anyway. When the Angel of the Lord blocked Balaam, his donkey saw Him, and steered off course.

But rather than realize the error of his ways, *Balaam beat his burro... He hit the donkey.* Finally God opened the donkey's mouth, so he could rebuke his owner.

And I wonder how many of us have been guilty of beating our burro? We're the cause of our bad situation, but rather than take responsibility, we take out our frustrations on our spouse, or kids, or peers?

There's an old AA saying, that's so true, "If I am not the problem, there can be no solution."

Today, our whole society is bent on shifting blame.

How often do we hear, "It's my parent's fault..." or "The wife's fault..." or "It's how I was raised..." or "I was born this way..." or "I'm a victim of circumstances..."

Ours is *the age of victimization*. It's been said, "No snowflake in an avalanche ever feels responsible."

I heard the story of a minor league baseball manager who was so frustrated with his center-fielder's play he benched the boy and took over the position himself.

Three balls were hit to him that next inning...

The **first** ball, took a bad hop and popped him in the mouth. The **second** ball, he lost in the lights and let drop right in front of him. And the **third** ball, was a sizzling liner he misjudged and let roll to the fence.

When the manager came off the field he grabbed the former fielder by the uniform, and shouted, "Son, you've got centerfield so messed up, not even I can get it straightened out!" *He wasn't seeing the root problem!*

Imagine a rope five feet long - one end is tied to my ankle - the other end is tied to a pit bull with rabies.

And here I am trying to live a normal life...

I get up in the morning. I go to bed at night. I head to the office. Do my job. I come home. I hang out with my amigos... *but all the while I'm ignoring the pit bull...*

Do you see a problem with this picture? Of course you do! There's no way my life will have any semblance of normality... Maybe for a few hours a day while the pit bull is asleep, but my life will be in turmoil.

I can't work because the dog bites and growls at my co-workers... I can't spend quality time with my kids. They're afraid of the vicious dog... My wife won't sleep with me because I'm bringing a pit bull to bed...

The only friend I've got is Michael Vick... My whole life is in shambles because of that lousy dog.

But here's my point... I can spend thousands of hours in counseling learning how to be a good employee - and a better husband - and a loving dad - and a loyal friend... *but I'm just treating the symptoms.*

Face it, until I get that dog-gone dog off my ankle nothing I do will solve my problems and straighten out my life. I got to stop side-stepping the real issue...

I can even come to church... I can walk the aisle... stand in the altar... pray a prayer to Jesus Himself...

I can cry my eyeballs out in sincere remorse for the damage I've done, and the pain I've caused the people I love. I can say I'm putting my faith in Jesus Christ...

But if I deliberately rise to my feet, and walk out without doing anything about the pit bull tied to my ankle, I'm no better off than when I came in.

“But Sandy, doesn't God cleanse us from our sin when we confess and ask for His forgiveness?”

Of course He does, but we've got to confess the right stuff. We need to confess the *real cause* of our sin.

Here's the question... **What's your pit bull?**

Is it your drinking, or greed, or a gambling problem, or is it an overstuffed ego, or gossip, or pornography?

What if I walk into my own living room with that pit bull tied around my ankle and fall asleep on the couch.

Imagine the damage that dog will do to my home?

He'll eat the carpet - poop on the floor - slobber on the furniture... And what if this goes on day after day - and I never deal with the dog - *even pretend it doesn't exist* - do you think my wife will continually come after me and clean up the mess I refuse to even address?

Kathy Adams is nobody's fool. *And neither is God!*

Hey, Jesus loves you. He died to forgive you.

God desperately wants to forgive you. But you've got to confess the sin that's really causing the problem.

Once, an old man offered the same prayer every Sunday morning at church. He'd stand and pray, "Lord, clean out the cobwebs. O, clean out the cobwebs."

Finally, one young fellow got tired of the old guy's prayer. As soon as the old man sat down, he jumped up and prayed, "Lord, forget about the cobwebs, just kill the spider." This is what Jesus is telling us...

Recognize the problem - what is it that "*causes*" you to sin? Then get it out on the table before the Lord.

First, *recognize the cause* – and **second, radically repent!** *Once you've identified what's causing the sin - what's next?* Jesus says, "**Pluck it out and cast it from you...**" - "**Cut it off and cast it from you...**"

Here's how to deal with a sinful stronghold - you **pluck it out** and **cut it off** and **cast it from you...**

And this calls for radical action! Can you think of anything more drastic than chopping off a hand or gouging out an eye? This imagery is graphic and violent. Obviously, Jesus is calling for desperate action.

And this is how you deal with *a sin that's hard to shake...* You stop playing around with it - *you pluck it out* - and *cut it off* - and *throw it away*. You do whatever it takes, to logistically and physically remove yourself from the vice that entangles you in its web.

Evangelist Billy Sunday use to say, "The reason we struggle with sin, is we treat it like a cream puff rather than a rattlesnake." Repentance takes sin seriously.

True repentance is more than remorse, tears, regret.

It's more than a wounded pride - or being sorry you got caught - or public embarrassment - or *wanting it over with* so you can avoid the painful consequences.

Listen carefully, "Repentance is the willingness to do whatever it takes not to sin again." Simply put, it's severing yourself from the cause of your sin.

Throughout the NT the Lord always expects two things from us... He wants us to **repent and believe...**

Believe... have faith. Turn your life over to Jesus. Let Him do an awesome work in you - *a heart transplant!*

He'll take out your heart of stone and replace it with a compliant heart - a heart that loves God and loves other people. Receive the power of His Holy Spirit.

But all the while my other responsibility is to **repent**. That means stay as far from the sin as possible. *Jesus cuts the rope - but you can't keep petting the pit bull.*

You need to supply *a willingness to change*.

I understand, we can't change ourselves. Jesus alone has the power to effect significant changes in our life, but we have to provide Him the desire to change.

God won't work changes in my life against my will.

This is why repentance takes drastic action... To overcome a habitual sin you need to remove yourself from the people and situations that perpetuate that sin.

Jesus said, *gouge it out - cut it off - cast it away...*

Stay away from the cause of that sin... Repentance gets very practical - *it's like cutting off an appendage...*

You take a route home from work that avoids the bar.

You skate around folks that use to sell you cocaine.

You avoid the girls who like to talk about other folks.

You throw out the pot plants you're still growing.

You get a porno filter for the internet, or let your wife browse your laptop... You block out the cable channels that stir up lustful thoughts... You cut up your credit cards so you don't fall prey to impulsive spending...

If you don't do these things, you can't say you're truly repentant. Real repentance involves *renewing my mind, restructuring my time, reordering my priorities, re-arranging my schedule, reassessing my friends.*

If maintaining my integrity means losing my job; then so be it!... If the TV is the bait stick - then I need to lock it in the closet for awhile... If I'm single and my physical desires are out of control, then repentance means I'll stop dating until I can get a *handle on my hormones.*

Recall our initial question, *how bad do you want it?*

The sacrifices each of us are called on to make will vary, but our reaction needs to be the same... *"Yes Lord, whatever I need to do!" Repent at the root!*

Don't settle for anything less than a total victory.

Here's a mistake people often make - guys think we can overcome our ensnaring sin by *tapering off*.

"O, I can still sin, I just won't sin as much..."

But if you are struggling with a stronghold the solution is not to *taper it off*... Jesus said, *"cut it off."*

If you want God's deliverance you can't expect to just ease away. The Lord tells us, we've got to *cut it off and cast it out*... Put an *end to your sin* - don't just try to strike a happy medium. Jesus is clear, whatever *"causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you..."*

It reminds me of the guy who went to a fortune teller.

All the gal did was smile at him. She had this plastic smile plastered all over her face. The man got so frustrated he tried to slap the silly grin off her face...

Later he was arrested for *striking a happy medium*...

That's not what you want to do if you're struggling with sin... *Don't strike a happy medium*. Don't hang on to sin for a rainy day. Some of you have a stash waiting right now. It's in your pocket - or the cabinet - or in the garage. *Hold on to sin and it'll come back to haunt you*.

Don't ever forget *stuff leads to other stuff*.

Life is full of chain reactions... It's the snowball effect!... get the ball rolling and it builds momentum.

And this works in either direction. Start moving in godliness, and godliness will grow. But likewise, little compromises end up leading to bigger compromises.

Here's the principle... *Stuff leads to other stuff*...

Vin Scully, longtime sportscaster for the Los Angeles Dodgers, once got a letter from a female listener who wrote to tell him she was expecting a baby.

You wonder what did Vin Scully have to do with this gal getting pregnant? It's not what you think...

She writes, "Dear Vin, my husband falls asleep at night listening to the Dodgers game. The radio is on his side of the bed, and to turn it off, I have to crawl across him. I want you to be the first to know that we're expecting a baby in six months." *Stuff leads to other stuff... good or bad... This is why we need to be careful.*

This is why tapering off is not enough, you've got to cut it off... Any *little action* can set off a *chain reaction*.

And this is why a big part of the Christian life isn't just cutting off bad habits and attitudes... it's developing good habits - new thought patterns - a new identity.

Remember the snowball effect works both ways...

Get rolling in the wrong direction, and it's hard to stop. But get some momentum flowing in a Godward direction, and you go from grace to grace - you grow!

Here's what Jesus is telling us, *recognize your sin - radically repent* - and then **third, recruit some help.**

If Jesus had meant to be taken literally it would be difficult to gouge out your own eye - or chop off your own hand. Most of us are too squeamish to do the job ourselves. *Harriman O'Neal is an exception to the rule.*

No, we would hire a doctor to perform the procedure.

And likewise when it comes to this kind of struggle with sin we need outside help - we need *a friend*.

I read where movie companies and concert promoters assign “sober companions” to famous actors and rock stars with substance abuse problems.

For the company they’re protecting their investment.

These people are called “clean-living assistants.”

They’re always on duty - around the guy - to remind the struggling star *of the issues* and *what’s at stake*.

As Christians we have a “sober companion” in the Holy Spirit. He dwells within us to *convict us - comfort us - guide us*. We should *trust Him* and *walk with Him*, but God also places us in a family with other believers.

In the church we need to recruit some friends to be *clean-living assistants*. We need a fellow Christian, or a group of believers - who’ll hold us accountable, and ask hard questions like... “How's it going at home?”

“*When was the last time you lost your temper with your kids?...*” “*How did you spend your evenings on your business trip?...*” “*Are you reading your Bible?...*”

I’ve heard it said, “Sin can breed only in the dark chambers of the mind.” Like mold and mildew, sin flourishes in dark, damp corners - but when we confess our sin, it gets it out in the open. When we exposed our sin to the light of God’s Word and the fresh air of the Holy Spirit - sin dissipates and loses its potency.

This is why James 5:16 instructs us to "Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed." Healing takes place - power is unleashed - when we open our lives to one another.

It's been observed, "In the early church Christians confessed their faults one to another. In the Medieval church they confessed their faults to a priest. In today's evangelical church we confess our faults to God alone"

Christians have become more and more private in our confessions, and we're shallower in our fellowship.

If we're going to deal effectively with the sin and struggles in our life we've got to make room for people who care - *who'll help chop off the sin when necessary.*

So often we worry about what other people will think, if they learn of our real problems - but most likely those "other people" have the same struggles. We hide from each other, while we desperately need each other.

Let me ask this group a question. **Will all the perfect people please stand up?** If you never sin - if sin is no problem for you - and you're qualified to cast the first stones, please stand up? *Well, no one is standing...*

That means everybody here is sure to extend grace and mercy, because it's grace and mercy they seek.

Don't you think it's time to reach out to someone who can help you *gouge it out, cut it off, and throw it away.*

Well, there's one more key we glean from our text.

When it comes to overcoming the sin in our lives we need to recognize its cause - repent radically - recruit some help - and **fourth**, **rethink** our priorities...

In Matthew 5:29-30 Jesus is making value judgments... Notice, twice He tells us, “It is more **profitable** for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.”

Understand a basic truth - nothing on this earth and in this life - is worth holding onto if it sends you to hell.

One of the worse effects of sin is that it clouds our judgment. In the midst of an ensnaring sin we can lose sight of important allegiances and loyalties.

I met a man once, who was so deluded by his sin he was stealing his elderly mother’s social security check each month so he could bet on the football games.

For a person battling with a stronghold of sin *the images popping up on the computer screen - another hit - placing the bet - the next drink - that one final time...* ends up becoming an all consuming fascination.

In the heat of the moment, your sin can mean more to you than your spouse, your kids, your God - even heaven and hell. This is why the person struggling with sin needs to stop and take the time to **rethink** their life.

Sadly, in the world we live in the emphasis is on the here and now. People live for the moment... or the weekend... but don’t get much further in their plans.

Eternity, heaven and hell - are mere afterthoughts.

But heaven and hell are real - and our eternal state is being determined right now. Nothing is more vital.

Eternity is today's most serious business.

You need to think about your priorities. We all need to rethink the issues that are really important to us!

Jesus is saying it's better to endure the un-anesthetized pain of gouging out an eyeball, and entering into heaven with a patch - than it is to spend eternity in hell with two eyes and 20/20 vision. *A blissful forever is worth a little discomfort right now...*

We need to rethink our priorities in light of eternity.

Just as a physical amputation causes severe pain, so can repentance. *To pluck out and cut off and cast away* - means saying good-bye to people, and places, and pleasures that use to fill a hole in our lives.

When we first repent, it's painful to lose some former preoccupations that we were dependent on. We've got to rethink... and decide that the gain is worth the loss!

In April, 2003 Aron Ralston was climbing in Utah's Blue John Canyon. He was out for a one-day hike. Ralston was navigating a narrow canyon when an 800 pound boulder shifted and pinned his arm into a crack.

Aron used a pocketknife to chip away the boulder, but it was *no use...* He rigged a pulley with robes he had, hoping to move the boulder - but it was *no good...*

After three days he was out of food and water. He realized he would die before anyone found him.

So the 27 year old engineer did what he had to do. *To save his life, he cut off his arm just below the elbow.*

Aron Ralston's drastic measures freed him from the entrapment and he was able to hike to safety. Aron said later, "I felt pain, and I coped with it. I moved on."

Living was worth the pain! *The same is true for us...*

Life in heaven... life with God... life in your own home, together with your wife and your kids... is worth whatever pain an amputation from sin might cause.

Our passage teaches us that following Jesus requires painful choices. It hurts to gouge out a sin that was a source of security - or cut off a friendship that was fun - or throw out a pleasure that helped you cope.

When you get serious about sin it will cost you.

God insists that you change - and you have to be willing to change - but at first, change is always painful.

Kent Hughes comments on this passage, "It hurts to sever your hand or to tear out an eye, and it hurts to give up wrong things in our lives. But it is better your blood be on the ground than your life burn on the rubbish heap for eternity." It stings to turn from certain vices, but the *gain* from doing so is worth the *pain*.

Speaking of pain, Jesus endured more than His share. He was willingly nailed to the cross on Calvary.

He voluntarily paid the frightful penalty for your sin...

For Jesus the cross was a trade-off. Though it cost Him enormous pain, the cross enabled Him to forgive you, and share His life with you - both now and forever.

Apparently, Jesus thinks you're worth the trouble!

And this is what following Jesus should mean to us.

When He calls on us “to take up our cross and follow Him.” We’re saying that He too is worth our trouble!

Life with Jesus - our blessings in Christ - are worth gouging out an eye, or chopping off a hand - or giving up whatever it might be that’s between us and Him.

The cross of Jesus is a symbol of sacrifice.

In one bold, stunning act of courage, Jesus took up His cross and laid down His life for us... And now in a thousand daily and often common ways we're called on to take up our cross and lay down our lives for Him.

Will you do it? *You were saved by the cross, now take up your cross!* Don’t think for a second you can take up a cross painlessly... *the cross will always cost you - some discomfort, some pain - but it’s worth it!*

We all want **growth**, but there’s no growth without **change**, and there’s no change without **loss**, and there’s no loss without **pain**. If you want to overcome your sin then expect to make a few **painful choices**.

Laying down your life and following Jesus is the only way to live victoriously over the sin that tempts us.

The only question left is **"how bad do you want it?"**

Is life with Jesus worth whatever it takes to overcome your ensnaring sin? How bad to you want to hear the words, “Well done good and faithful servant?”

Bad enough to *recognize the cause of your sin...*

Repent radically...

Recruit some help...

And *rethink* your priorities?

It's time for you to *chop it off – pluck it out - give it to God* - and with all that's left follow Jesus! Today, you can *cross over* from sin to victory through the *cross!*