The Heart Behind the Act

MATTHEW 5:27-32 (BSB) · SMALL-GROUP LESSON · DIGDEEPER.AI

The Big Idea

Jesus isn't raising the bar so you'll try harder; he's showing you the standard is so high that nobody clears it, which is exactly why you stop trusting your clean record and start trusting him.

Opening Lines

Nobody in this room has torn out an eye. And Jesus knew nobody would. So what is he actually asking for when he uses language that violent?

Before You Teach

- Goal: Get the room to feel the standard drop past the act and into the gaze and the imagination, until every person quietly stops standing on their own record. If they leave thinking 'at least I never actually did it,' the lesson failed.
- If you're short on time, cut: The rabbinic Shammai-versus-Hillel divorce debate. It's fascinating background, but if time is tight, name it in one line and keep the weight on the heart and the gospel.
- Where the moment lives: In the moment someone admits the standard reaches something they can't fix by behavior management. Transformation isn't better willpower here; it's the relief of running to Christ instead of to a clean surface.
- Your prep: Sit with 'already committed adultery with her in his heart' until it convicts YOU, not the imagined worst offender in the room. Come having already lost the argument that you're fine.

Run It In Your Setting

The same lesson, sequenced three ways. Pick the one that fits your group and your clock.

CLASSROOM · ~20 PEOPLE · 45 MINUTES

Classroom opening, hands raised (4 min). Read the passage aloud (3 min). Teach Gehenna with the physical image and land on the keepable line + silence (8 min). Questions 1, 2, 4 (18 min). Gospel pivot: he kept it perfectly, offers it to you (6 min). Out-loud commitment + prayer over the specific things named (6 min). Transformation lives in question 4 when hands come down and nobody's clean. If short, shorten the divorce discussion (Q3) to one question, but keep it.

SMALL GROUP · ~8 PEOPLE · 60 MINUTES

Small-group opening naming the resistance (5 min). Read passage (3 min). Teach Gehenna + line + silence (8 min). All five questions, spending real time on Q3's two-texts

tension (28 min). Go First, Go Real — you name your doorway before asking them (5 min). Commitments out loud + spontaneous prayer over their exact words (11 min). Transformation lives in the honesty of the commitment round. If short, trim Q1.

COFFEE · 2-3 FRIENDS · 30 MINUTES

Coffee opening — the phone-at-dinner question (3 min). Read verses 27-32 (2 min). One question deeply: 'who's left standing on a clean record?' (10 min). You go first and go real with your own doorway (4 min). Each person names one obstacle for the week (6 min). Short prayer over what they named (3 min). Transformation lives in going first honestly. If short, give verses 31-32 two minutes and one sentence: Jesus is protecting wives from being discarded. Don't skip them.

Go First, Go Real

This is a habit for every lesson you'll ever teach — this week we drill it deliberately. Remember week 1, when you went first and went real before asking anyone else to? Level 2 raises the cost. This passage is about the private hidden life — lust, wandering eyes, the slow corrosion of a marriage. That means the easy move is to keep your example generic and safe ('we all struggle with temptation'). Don't. Go first with something that actually costs you a little to say out loud in front of these people. Not a confession that damages others or crosses a line — but real enough that the room feels you're standing in the same water they're standing in, not lecturing from the shore. The rule: if your example makes you look wise, it's too polished. Pick one that makes you look human.

Why This Passage Matters

This is one of the hardest passages in the Sermon on the Mount to teach honestly, and that's precisely why it matters. Most rooms will do one of two things with it: they'll flinch and go quiet because it names something private, or they'll relax because they never actually committed adultery, so surely this doesn't apply to them. Both reactions miss what Jesus is doing. He reaches behind the seventh commandment, past the act, into the gaze and the appetite and the wanting, and he does it as the only one with the authority to say what the law meant all along. He is God in the flesh reading the human heart and finding it guilty at a depth no external behavior could ever cover. If you teach this well, nobody leaves standing on their own righteousness. And that's the mercy hiding inside the severity — the bar is drawn so high that it drives people off their clean record and straight to Christ, the only man who ever kept this word perfectly and who offers that perfection to sinners. You get to hand your room that relief. Not 'try harder,' but 'stop pretending, and come.' There are few gifts a teacher gets to give that are better than that.

Catch the Fire First

Before you stand up, do the exercise yourself. Sit alone and name the actual doorway sin uses in YOUR life — not the polished version, the real one. The phone after the house is quiet. The scroll that starts innocent. The comparison that curdles into wanting. Then do

what the apply card asks: put one real obstacle between you and it before you teach this, not after. Move the charger. Delete the app. Whatever your version is. You cannot ask a room to take 'pluck it out' seriously if you dodged it yourself an hour before. Walk in having already paid a small, concrete price. It will change how you say every word.

Bring Your Own Story

- A time you told yourself 'I never actually did anything' — and later saw the wanting had already done its work in you.
- A small, dumb, concrete obstacle you once put between yourself and something that kept catching you (and whether it worked).
- A marriage — yours or one you watched up close — where tenderness or bitterness compounded quietly over ordinary days.
- SAMPLE (polished vs. real): Polished — 'I've learned the importance of guarding my heart in my marriage.' Real — 'I realized I could tell you exactly what my phone showed me last week and almost nothing about what my wife said at dinner.'
- Guardrail: real is not raw — pick a story you've already made peace with, not one you're still bleeding from.

Three Ways to Open

CLASSROOM: "By a show of hands: how many of us have kept the seventh commandment — never committed adultery? Keep your hands up. Now listen to how Jesus defines it, and let's see whose hand stays up."

Start with a shared assumption and then dismantle it, so the room discovers the point instead of being told it.

SMALL GROUP: "Some of us are already halfway to tuning this out because we think it's about the worst thing a person can do, and we didn't do it. Give me ten minutes to show you Jesus aimed this at something far more ordinary than that."

Name the room's likely resistance out loud first; it disarms defensiveness and buys honesty.

COFFEE: "When's the last time you looked at your phone before you looked at the person across from you at dinner? Hold that. Jesus has something to say about where the eyes go."

A single concrete question that touches everyone's actual daily life pulls the passage close before you ever open it.

Teaching the Word

Teach the Greek word Gehenna. Jesus doesn't say 'hell' as an abstraction — he names a place his hearers could picture, the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem, where kings had once burned children in sacrifice, a valley the prophets cursed as the Valley of Slaughter

(Jeremiah 7:31-32). When he says it's better to lose an eye than for your whole body to be thrown into Gehenna, he's pointing at that cursed valley and saying: that's what's at stake with the wanting you keep excusing. Here's the physical image — hold up your hand, look at it, and slowly mime cutting it off and throwing it away, then say the number the passage gives: it is more profitable to lose one part than to lose the whole. Let them feel that math. This is not exaggeration for effect; it's Jesus measuring how deep the disease runs and how far he means for us to go against it. Then land on the line and let it sit: 'already committed adultery with her in his heart.' [Silence. Count to seven before you say another word.]

Discussion Questions

1. Jesus says the lustful look is already adultery in the heart. Why does he reach behind the act and go after the wanting itself?

Coaching note: Steer them away from 'because thoughts lead to actions' — that's true but small. He's exposing that sin lives in the heart, not on the surface. Push until someone says the standard is the heart, not the behavior.

If it stalls: Would you rather be married to someone who never cheated but wanted to constantly, or someone whose heart was actually yours? Why does that difference matter to Jesus?

2. Nobody takes 'pluck out your eye' literally. So what IS Jesus asking for with language that extreme?

Coaching note: Let them wrestle. The point is proportion — this is how seriously he wants us to fight, and how deep the problem goes. Land on: the eye isn't the problem, the heart is, but the fight against it should feel that drastic.

If it stalls: Name one concrete thing in your daily routine that would be like 'cutting off a hand' — inconvenient, but it would starve a temptation. Would you do it?

3. Divorce was allowed under Moses. Jesus tightens it right back down to God's original design. Hold both of those on the table — how do they fit together?

Coaching note: This is your two-texts-in-tension moment. Put Deuteronomy's permission next to Jesus' restriction and refuse a tidy answer. 'Both are Scripture. Why did Moses permit what God didn't design?' Let the wrestling do the teaching; Matthew 19:8 is the key — Moses permitted it because of hard hearts.

If it stalls: Was the divorce certificate originally a cruelty or a mercy to the woman? What changed to make Jesus push back on how it was being used?

4. If lust is adultery in the heart, then who in this room is left standing on their own clean record?

Coaching note: Do not rescue the room from the silence here. This is the pivot to the gospel. Let it be uncomfortable, then say gently: that's the point — he raised the bar this high to move us off ourselves and onto him.

If it stalls: Honestly, before tonight, did you think this passage was about you or about someone worse than you? What just changed?

5. Jesus is the only man who ever kept this word perfectly. What does it change for you that he offers that record to people who can't keep it?

Coaching note: This is the relief after the weight. Don't let it stay theological — ask what it changes

in how they walk into their week. The severity was mercy in disguise.

If it stalls: If you already know you can't clear this bar, is that discouraging or is it a relief? Say which and why.

Questions You May Hear

"Does this mean divorce is never allowed, ever?"

Jesus names one exception right here — sexual immorality. And in Matthew 19 he explains Moses permitted divorce because of hardness of heart, not because it was ever God's design. He's restoring what marriage was meant to be, not writing a rulebook for every hard case.

"Is a passing attraction the same as lust, then? Am I sinning just by noticing someone?"

Jesus targets the gaze that lingers to feed the wanting — the look that cultivates it, not the involuntary first glance. Job said he made a covenant with his eyes; the sin is the deliberate return, not the fact that you have eyes.

"Why does Jesus quote 'you have heard it was said' if he's not overturning the law?"

He's not softening or replacing the seventh commandment — he's driving it inward to what it always demanded. Only the one who gave the law at Sinai has the authority to say what it truly meant, and he says it always reached the desire, not just the act.

"Isn't 'writing of divorce' talking about a legal document we don't even use anymore?"

A first-century husband could end a marriage with a single certificate handed to his wife. It started as a mercy giving her legal standing, but by Jesus' day it had become the paperwork of a hard heart — dismissing a wife almost at whim.

For Experienced Leaders

- The room will try to make this passage about the worst person they can imagine instead of themselves. Your whole job is to keep pulling it back to 'you.' Every time it drifts outward, gently drag it inward.
- Watch for the person who goes silent and stiff — this passage lands on real wounds, real affairs, real divorces. Don't single anyone out, and make sure your tone carries the mercy hiding in the severity, not just the severity.
- Don't over-explain Gehenna into a lecture on hell. Name the valley, let the image do its work, and move. The picture is stronger than the doctrine here.

Landing the Lesson

Commitments: Before we pray, say out loud one specific doorway you're going to put an obstacle in front of this week — the phone, the app, the pattern. Name the thing and name the obstacle.

Close by praying out loud over the exact doorways and marriages people just named —

the specific phone, the specific pattern, the specific couple someone mentioned. Don't reach for a written prayer; saying their real words back to God is the point.

If you run out of time: If the room only gets to question 3, stop there and stay. The tension between Moses and Jesus is worth a whole night; don't rush to the gospel pivot if they're still genuinely wrestling.

Midweek follow-up: Midweek, send one line to whoever named an obstacle: 'Still got the charger in the kitchen?' Nothing more. The follow-up is the accountability.

Free at digdeeper.ai/devotionals/matthew/5-27-32/lesson

Handout

MATTHEW 5:27-32 (BSB) · DIGDEEPER.AI

During the lesson:

- Before tonight, did you think this passage was mostly about you, or about someone worse than you? Write which — honestly.

- Name the specific doorway sin actually uses to catch you (the phone at night, the scroll, the comparison). Write the real one.

- Write one concrete obstacle you'll put between yourself and it THIS week — not next week.

- Hold both on the table: Moses permitted divorce; Jesus points back to God's original design. In a sentence, what has to be true for both to stand?

- Jesus kept this word perfectly and offers that record to you. Finish the sentence: 'If I can't clear this bar, then...'

Take-home actions:

- Name your actual doorway and put a real obstacle in front of it tonight — if it's the phone in bed, move the charger to the kitchen before you lie down.

- Tonight, when you're tempted to scroll through other lives, look up at your spouse instead and ask one real question about their day, then listen without reaching for your phone.

- If bitterness has been quietly building at home, break the pattern with one deliberate word of tenderness before bed — a thank-you, an apology, a hand on the shoulder.

Christ went to the cross for hearts that stumble, and he holds the marriages that feel worn thin.