

Think about the most important thing you have in this world. Your family, your spouse, your own life. Now suppose a mob boss approached you and said he would take that very thing you cared for and loved the most, unless you gave him something else important like all your money, your car, or your house. That's a decision to make! In the end you would have to sacrifice something you valued a lot to save the thing you valued most. It's a tough choice, but one that should be clear. Imagine though if you weren't told about the option to give up one of your material possessions in place of a loved one! Knowing that you have a choice to make is important information. Jesus today gives us desperately needed information about the cost of our own sin. Jesus tells us to struggle against sin. Sin threatens to take away the most important thing we have: our soul. From Jesus words we see that it is so easy to sin! The struggle may be hard, but sin is something worth fighting hard against!

One of the things that makes sin so hard to fight against is the fact that it is so easy to sin. Maybe that statement surprises you. When we talk about sin, we define it as not doing something God wants you to do. We often look at the commandments for this. It's convenient to have a ten point short list on how not to sin. The people of Jesus' day were no different! They knew that God's law could be summarized in the ten commandments. It really should be easy to follow ten rules, but we can't even follow these.

If you put effort into obeying the commandments it may seem like we are playing by the rules. I don't worship idols, I don't curse people with God's name, I go to church, oh look we're here right now! My parents? Well maybe I didn't respect them when I was younger, but I respect them pretty well now, Murder? Not a chance. I don't commit adultery, I don't steal from people, I don't give "false testimony," coveting? I'm not sure which one is which but I think I'm good there too. Jesus had a message for people who think they don't struggle with sinning against the commandments.

If you look only at your actions it's unlikely that you break every commandment, at least according to the way it's worded. In our society today when we think about laws and legal agreements and lawyers, we think about long phrases and precise wording, lengthy documents and airtight contracts. Everything should be covered specifically and individually. God's commands were not written for people only of our times. When God wrote the commandments for the people of Israel, few of them could read, fewer of them could write. God spoke to them in terms that their culture can understand. He gave them a law and expected them to follow the spirit of the law, not just the letter. For those that could read and for those who were to administer justice, God *did* give a detailed code of laws for religious ceremony and civil government of Israel. These codes pretty much make up most of Leviticus and Deuteronomy! Too much for your average shepherd or carpenter to memorize! But they could know what God wanted them to do by following his commands and applying their principle to many situations in life.

Jesus reminds us that it might be easy to outwardly follow a command, at least in a way where no other people could catch you. But God doesn't give us commands to mould our behavior and confine our actions. He wants us to be pure in our hearts too! God looks at our hearts! Any sin committed in the heart is just as serious as any sin acted on with words or actions.

In this section Jesus targets sexual sin as covered in the 6th commandment: Do not commit adultery. The people acted like they knew and kept the commandment. It was simple. If you're married, especially a married woman, don't have sex with a man other than your husband! Anything else goes! People assumed they could get away with anything not covered by the wording of this commandment. If you read the civil law for Israel, you might be surprised to find that most examples of the law were applied to women. If a man wanted to ignore the actual intent of the law, he could convince himself that this commandment only applied to women! But now Jesus targets men and uses them as his example. Men! Don't have lust in your heart! It doesn't matter if you're 12 or 95, don't look or think about women in a sexual way if she isn't your wife! That might seem harsh. Lust is so easy! It seems so harmless, it just happens without even trying!

Yet lust isn't so harmless. Allowing it to remain in your heart only makes it more likely to return and stay longer. Lust is "gateway drug" for other sexual sins. What may seem like a harmless pleasure of the

imagination may look for an outlet. Seeking pleasure for oneself is something the devil knows how to help you with. The devil is glad that porn is so available, private, and free! He takes advantage of a culture that encourages its use. The devil knows that it's addictive power might haunt you long after you try to stop using it. The devil takes advantage of a culture that encourages and normalizes sexual activity and experimentation long before marriage is even thought about, and even then, when marriage might be a few months or weeks away, the temptation to abuse the blessing of marriage may still be strong. God gives us this command to respect and protect the wonderful blessings of marriage where he gives a couple the blessings of sex, companionship, and often, children.

These blessings are meant for marriage but when they occur outside of marriage they can unfortunately seem like burdens! God wishes to give us a lot of wonderful things in marriage. Marriage has always been established as a lifelong commitment. Sadly in a sinful world God's perfect plan cannot be realized. Marriage is ended by death and divorce. God doesn't simply "dislike" divorce. He says that he hates it! But he allows divorce to protect a victim in the marriage. Where there is a breaking of the 6th commandment or a desire by one party to leave and abandon the other, God gives divorce to the faithful spouse as a guilt-free way out of the marriage commitment.

Divorce isn't meant as a convenient tool to quit when a marriage gets tough. It isn't a natural way out of a commitment when that feeling of "true love" goes away. It isn't there to use when a spouse no longer seems attractive or interesting as when you said "I do." Jesus makes it clear that divorce should never be used this way. Divorce used for any reason other than marital unfaithfulness or abandonment is sin.

It is a sin and a sin like any other. A sin that Jesus paid for. Jesus' disciples knew what Jesus was going to do. When Jesus spoke these words he spoke them to people who would later see Jesus die on the cross, and then be raised back to life! We know that Jesus paid for these sins too; the sins of lust, the sins of porn, the sins of unfaithfulness and the sins of divorce.. It isn't easy to hear our Savior call us out on sin, but we can always find comfort and peace in his ultimate message of forgiveness. When we face our sin on our own, it is depressing, terrifying, and unpleasant! With Jesus we know we have that forgiveness and the strength to fight our temptations.

Jesus calls our attention to sin because sin is worth fighting against! He warns us that the consequence for sin is an eternity in hell. The Greek word Jesus uses for hell is γέεννα Gehenna. A transliteration of the Hebrew, "Hinnom Valley." The Hinnom Valley was a ravine just south of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. A place of trash fires and perpetually burning rubbish. Hell, a place where all the garbage of the world burns forever without stop! Hell is a place to avoid! This is why Jesus speaks to us about it. This warning isn't for the "bad" people, it isn't directed to the unbelievers in the world, it is directed to you and me! Persistent sin can wear down your faith! If you don't fight it, it can take over your life and make you stop believing in your Savior.

Jesus has harsh words for our sins, but now we know why. Fight against sin that can lead you to hell! It might be painful and it might be hard, but the struggle against sin is always worth it. Cutting out your eye might seem extreme. You rely on your eye! Would Jesus want me to get rid of it? Jesus is using strong language to make a point. You might need to take extreme measures in your fight against sin. Perhaps it is the kind of shows that you watch, that may encourage, celebrate, and promote sin. Perhaps the friends you spend time with who want to include you in sinful choices like drinking too much, skipping church, or casual sex. Maybe it's your own lifestyle that you're addicted to, drinking, drugs, or porn. All of these things can be hard to cut out if you rely on them.

If anything is leading you away from Jesus, if these things are leading farther and farther down a path of sin to hell, cut them out and throw them away! Find new ways to be entertained, find new friends. If cutting off your hand or gouging out your eye is hard, don't expect that cutting out sin is going to be easy, but you don't have to do it alone. Find some help. It's worth the price. Turn to God's Word for daily encouragement. When you struggle, turn to it every hour.

We know that we will receive strong and effective encouragement from God himself! He gives us power and strength through the Spirit in his Word. He gives us support and love in our brothers and sisters. Turn to these things for strength.

Cutting out sin may not be a pleasant choice, but sin and the devil want to take your most valuable possession from you, your soul. Jesus gives us a much needed warning. Struggle against your sin, even though it is hard! Jesus will be there to give you help, strength, and support in this struggle. You aren't struggling alone. Most importantly, Jesus is always there to give your forgiveness and peace until you there will be no more struggle for you in heaven. Amen

Theme: Sin is worth fighting against!

1. What information does Jesus give us about sin?
 2. What's one reason why fighting against sin is so hard?
 3. When does it seem like we are "playing by the rules?"
 4. What do we usually think of when we talk about legal agreements and codes?
 5. What are people supposed to do with the principles of the commandments?
 6. Which commandment does Jesus give special attention in this section of Matthew?
 7. Why isn't lust harmless?
 8. When does divorce become a sin?
 9. What did Jesus do about sexual sins?
 10. Do you think "cutting out" sin is an easy thing to do?
 11. Where do we receive strength from in our struggle against sin?
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1. Do you sometimes feel like you're doing fine keeping the law? What makes it easy for you to look at the commandments and not worry about them?
 2. Why do you think some topics (like sex) covered in the commandments are more "taboo" than others? Is that a good or a bad thing?
 3. Most people have friends or relatives who have gone through a divorce, maybe you have yourself. Explain why God doesn't like divorce. What comfort can you give to someone who is going/has gone through a divorce?
 4. Share some things that can cause a person to sin, but are hard to cut out of one's life.