

## THE URGENCY OF SELF CONTROL

Mt.5:27-30; 18:6-9; Mk.9:42-48

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### I. INTRODUCTION

1. In Mt.5:27-30, in the “Sermon on the Mount,” Jesus presented some very stern, urgent warnings about self-control.
  - a. After condemning the man who rivets his attention upon a woman, with lust in his heart for her (characterizing such as mental “adultery”), the Lord employed strong language to press his point.
2. Jesus did the same thing in Mt.18:6-9 and Mk.9:42-48 after warning about offending or casting a stumbling block before “one of these little ones which believe in me.”
3. In the context of these passages Jesus is speaking of injuries of a spiritual nature (through stumbling blocks or offences) which we may cause to others as well as to ourselves.
4. Most of us take some care to guard ourselves against physical injury. We insure against fire, flood, accidents, even earthquake damage to our homes, etc. We avoid taking unnecessary chances; we attend to early signs of illness or disease of the body.
5. Yet sometimes, when it pertains to spiritual dangers, we are somewhat like an official, a security agent, or a security agency, on the alert against external assault, but unsuspecting of treachery within.
6. In a moral and spiritual sense, it may be said, and even be true, that “A man’s foes are they of his own household,” or those from within. Cf. Mt.10:36.
7. The allusion to these external members of the body, to the hand, the foot, and the eye, which offend, bringing about sin and destruction in our lives; that is, to our souls, and indicate a lack of self-control from within. For “out of the heart (the will of man) proceed evil thoughts.” Mt.12:34,35; 15:18-20.
8. When acts are repeated, habits are formed that become part of ourselves by habitual practice. They become what we sometimes call “second nature.” By habitual practice they seem to become a part of ourselves.
9. Regardless, Jesus says, “Pluck it out, cut it off, and cast it from thee.”

10. Obviously, the context of these texts deals with temptation and the need of self-control. In fact, the very nature of the language used suggests the urgency of self-control.
11. As we examine these texts, let us take note of the truths taught therein, the personal action urgently demanded, and the awful, eternal consequences for failure to do so!

## **II. DISCUSSION**

### **A. FIRST, TAKE NOTE OF THE SUPPOSITION PERTAINING TO AN INNOCENT MEMBER OF ONE'S BODY.**

1. The best and most cherished or precious members of the body, particularly the right eye and the right hand, may lead us into sin.
2. If uncontrolled, they **WILL** do so; they will become a **CAUSE** of offence or a stumbling.
3. The eye is given to see with; the hand, to work with. Both are precious and are from God. Both are innocent in and of themselves.
4. The physical body is not an evil thing, the Gnostics to the contrary, but is meant to be the servant of the soul to the glory of God; As such, it is an instrument "fearfully and wonderfully made," Psa.139:14.
5. We do not honor God by dishonoring the body which he has bestowed upon us.
6. But the body may become the tool of the tempter. It may be corrupted and perverted and become the slave of sin and Satan rather than the servant of the soul.
7. This is clearly implied in our texts!

### **B. THE URGENT DUTY OF SELF-CONTROL IS ENJOINED.**

1. Mt.5:29a; 18:9a; Mk.9:47a: "And if thy right eye offend thee (cause thee to stumble), pluck it out, and cast it from thee..."
2. Mt.5:30a; 18:8a; Mk.9:43a: "And if thy right hand offend thee (cause thee to stumble), cut it off, and cast it from thee..."
3. Mk.9:45a: "And if thy foot offend thee (cause thee to stumble), cut it off..."
4. Without a doubt, by the use of this strong language, the implication of the urgency of self-control, and/or self-denial, is evident.
5. It is so urgent that whatever is necessary, however drastic, it must be done.
6. This necessarily implies the urgency:

- a. Of a firm personal resolution of restraining the members and the imaginations from all unlawful objects. Cf. Rom.6:1,2,11-14,19,20.
  - b. Of avoiding all occasions of sin.
  - c. Of the continual use of all those means whereby sin may be entirely subdued by us. And it can be done. See 1Cor.10:13; 9:27; Jas.1:12.
7. This is morally stipulative because of the appeal to the free-will and the spiritual agency of man created in God's image.
- a. These obligations stipulated would have no weight or real influence but for this.
  - b. Just as one **CAN** cut off a hand or a foot, and pluck out an eye, so one **CAN** refrain from evil desires and affections, and curb unruly appetites. God has never required of man what man cannot do!
  - c. This is the **sin** of the ruined one, viz. he is self-ruined, all to his own destruction; he is without excuse. Rom.1:20b.
  - d. Self-sacrificing, self-control, self-denial, is the urgent need of all. Cf. 1Cor.9:27; Mt.16:24-26.
  - e. It is better to make any sacrifice than to retain any sin.
  - f. The meaning, of course, is not that any man is in such a position that he has no better way to avoid sin and hell (than being maimed); but if he had no better, he should choose this!
  - g. Nor does it mean that maimed persons are maimed in heaven; but if it were so, it were a less evil!

**C. THE ULTIMATE, FATAL, ETERNAL DANGER OF SELF-INDULGENCE AND OF ALLOWING OUR MEMBERS TO BE THE INSTRUMENTS OF SIN.**

- 1. Mt.5:29b,30b; 18:8b,9b; Mk.9:43b,45b,47b reveal the awful, terrible, fatal, eternal consequences to the unrepentant sinners in the world to some.
  - a. "...for it is profitable for thee, that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell," Mt.5:29b,30b.
  - b. "...it better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire," Mt.18:8b.

- c. "...it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire," Mt.18:9b.
  - d. "...it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched," Mk.9:43b.
  - e. "...it is better for thee to enter halt into life, than having two feet to be cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched," Mk.9:45b.
  - f. "...it is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into fell fire," Mk.9:47b.
2. The difficulty here, I am persuaded, is not really our understanding the true meaning of our Lord's words, but of our application of them. Our willingness to absolutely live by them!
  3. The truth taught in these passages is just another way of saying, "the wages of sin is death," Rom.6:23. Cf. Mt.10:28; 25:46a; 7:21-23; Rev.21:8. Also see, Gal.5:19-21; Eph.5:3-6; Col.3:5,6.

**D. ALSO, OF NECESSITY, THE STRONG LANGUAGE OF "PLUCKING OUT" AND "CUTTING OFF" IN THESE VERSES IS NOT LITTERAL BUT FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE.**

1. In spite of this obvious truth from the context and other principles of biblical interpretation, there have been those who have misinterpreted the language, terrified themselves and others, and even maimed and emasculated themselves, having taken the passages literally (in conjunction with Mt.19:11,12).
  - a. Origen (c. A.D. 185-254), a theologian of the post-apostolic period, is reported to be one who took the passages, along with Mt.19:11,12, so literally that he emasculated himself.
2. The whole of the passages considered is steeped in metaphor – "a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another by way of suggesting a likeness or analogy between them."
  - a. Destruction of evil thoughts and practices by self-control is here commanded by means of strong figurative language.
  - b. The point to which Jesus really directs our thoughts is, that all evil thoughts in and by us, however closely they may sit to the heart, must be destroyed – ceased to be practiced at all costs!

3. By this dramatic form of language – “pluck it out” and “cut it off”, Jesus introduces another figure of speech, known as the “hyperbole,” which is a symbol that introduces an obvious exaggeration (no duplicity is intended) to press home a point with the greatest vigor – the urgency of self-control!
4. It is not, never has been, by literally mutilating or punishing the physical body in some way, but only by a wise and resolute self-control a wise and resolute rule of our own spirit, that we can maintain our loyalty to Christ, and walk with even and steadfast foot in his ways. Cf. Col.2:20-23.
5. And if and when we find that, whatever it is, in ourselves, which hinders or makes us stumble in any way, He would have us know that, unless we free ourselves from it, renounce it, it will destroy us!
6. And we can’t cut off or pluck out sin by cutting off or plucking out one of the members of our physical body! Nor does Jesus require us to ever maim ourselves as an act of penance, or on any ascetic grounds!

### III. SUMMING UP IN CONCLUDING THOUGHTS.

1. Jesus was not suggesting that sin is resident in any physical members of one’s body, so that by amputations or extraction a spiritual problem of sin is removed.
  - a. Plucking out an eye will not cure the lust in a lecherous mind; for one-eyed people can still lust.
  - b. Nor will the removal of one hand convert a thief!
2. Jesus simply employed specific body parts (precious ones), and extreme actions, to address inward, spiritual problems, and the urgent need of self-control, because the body contains the “instruments” which the soul uses to express itself.
3. Jesus expressly, emphatically, instructs all who would follow him to:
  - a. Identify their deadly, spiritual weaknesses.
  - b. Exert all possible discipline to rid themselves of any problems that would jeopardize their souls.
4. From these texts we learn that:
  - a. The Lord’s treatment of sin is radical – do something about it, or else! Excise it, or be eternally lost!
  - b. The Lord’s demand of self-control is urgent. No time should be wasted in acting. No effort spared to exercise it!
  - c. The Lord’s call to obedience is for the benefit of ourselves and others both here and hereafter.

- (1) We are urged to do this for the benefit of both. 1Cor.8:7-13; 10:23-33; Rom.14:14-23. See Heb.5:8,9; Mt.7:21-23; Lk.6:46.