

Oh...Hello There, Handsome... (Sermon on the Mount #12)  
Matthew 6:19-24, James 1:22-27  
January 31, 2016  
Pastor Dave Carver

You've seen it a million times. A man. A woman. They eye each other from across the room. Is something happening? Could there be a spark? Some excitement?



Hair is flipped. Legs or arms are folded or not. Eyebrows are raised, and heads tilted.

Laughter and ... “Oh, hello, there, handsome...” “Who, me? Handsome, well, I don't really know about that...”

Conversation. Innuendo. Risk. Suggestion.

Flirting. I've been working with adolescents for almost 40 years. I usually recognize it when I see it.

On the one hand, there is a certain helpfulness and utility to flirting. Somehow, in order for the species to survive, we need to establish interest in one another. The ability to “catch someone's eye” is useful in determining whether there is a possibility of a real relationship with another person.

But when the flirt goes on too long, it can become counterproductive, if not downright dangerous. Signals are mixed. It can lead to harm – emotional, spiritual, and physical.

But we all know people who are really good at it, don't we? People who seem to enjoy using a system of signals and actions that are designed to confuse, or toy with, or manipulate others. In fact, the two top definitions of “flirt” in Google's dictionary are:

- behave as though attracted to or trying to attract

Two slides  
with  
definition  
on them

someone, but for amusement rather than with serious intentions.

- experiment with or show a superficial interest in (an idea, activity, or movement) without committing oneself to it seriously.

Again, most of us have flirted in relationships at some time in the past. If we hadn't, we wouldn't be where we are, relationally. But sooner or later, most of us stop flirting and dive in.

In the Gospel of Matthew, we hear of the extraordinary circumstances of Jesus' birth. We are told of how he comes to adulthood in the shadow of his more prominent cousin, whom we know as John the Baptist. <sup>1</sup>He comes to engage



his community and the world by launching a ministry of teaching and healing. In so doing, Jesus catches the world's eye – and he caught the eye of those who would become his first followers. There's a miracle over here, or a profound message over there, and the social media is buzzing... “Hey, check this guy out...”

And then we get to Matthew chapter five and begin to hear the teaching we know as the Sermon on the Mount. Here is a definitive pronouncement that we are not called to be primarily those who flirt with either God or the world.

The Sermon contains, as we have heard, a description of living the Jesus way – as peacemakers, or those who are poor in spirit, pure in heart, and so on. Living the Jesus way, apparently, means developing an awareness of the power that anger, lust, deceit, selfishness, or hatred can have in one's life. The Sermon on the Mount, with its call to a life of integrity and intentionality, is not for the faint of heart. And I can picture Jesus eyeing his followers and saying, “Look, if you are here only because you liked the healings or the

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<sup>1</sup> *Christ Healing a Leper*, Rembrandt (1650-55).

miracles, then you'd better keep walking, because the life of discipleship is intense. There is no room for flirting.”



<sup>2</sup>And because the life to which Jesus calls his followers is so all-encompassing, he gives them three practices with which to engage their world and their Lord: generous giving, faithful prayer, and sincere fasting. These are behaviors, says Jesus, that will equip us to adopt this kind of lifestyle.

If we want to live lives that are reflective of God's intentions for us as expressed in chapter 5, then we've got to be good at giving, praying, and fasting – because these are the disciplines that will mold us into faithful followers of Jesus.

We picked up this morning where we left off last week, in the middle of chapter 6. After giving his followers the mindset and behaviors that will allow us to live more like he does, he explores the danger of relying too much on what we *have* as we seek to define who we *are*. Material goods and money, he says, are to be used, rather than collected.



He takes an example from Middle Eastern culture. Judaism, Islam, and other traditions from that area all hold to some form of belief that if we look at the world around us or at each other with a malicious glare – what we might call today a “stink eye” – that we will wind up with harsh, judgmental, or miserly spirits. The opposite of an “evil eye” is the “simple eye” or the “single eye”, one that denotes an attitude of good will or kindness. If we have an eye that is trained in this fashion, Jesus says, we are more likely to be able to live by the light of God's presence in the world.

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<sup>2</sup> *Palestine: Sermon on the Mount*, Vasily Polenov (1900)



<sup>3</sup>Our reading for today concludes with the familiar passage in verse 24 about serving God and mammon. When Jesus uses this word, he was apparently using a word that, in his time, simply referred to money, although in the years after his death and resurrection, mammon came to represent a personification of the evil and idolatrous aspects of materialism and greed that seek to control us. Key to any understanding of this teaching of Jesus is his use of the word “serve”, as in the phrase, “you cannot serve God and mammon.” In choosing this vocabulary, Jesus is presuming the captivity of the human heart and spirit. Each of us will fall in line behind and serve something or someone. That is not in question. The question is, what will it be? Ourselves? Our own beauty or wisdom or fear or riches or worry? Our insecurities? Or God? We all live for something or someone, and we are all willing to direct our energies toward that thing or person. The question is not “will you serve?”, but “whom will you serve?”

If we allow ourselves to think that being a disciple is a part time hobby, then we miss the boat. God created us for, and expects from us, singularity of purpose and faithfulness.



<sup>4</sup>In this excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructs his followers to adopt patterns of behavior that will transform us into the kinds of people that God intends us to be. That exhortation is echoed in the letter from James, who reminds us that it’s not enough to simply *hear* the Word, we’ve got to internalize it and *practice* it. The way that we exercise our ability to choose to serve God rather than mammon or some other idol is to engage in behaviors like giving, prayer, and fasting.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Worship of Mammon*, Evelyn De Morgan (1909).

<sup>4</sup> *The Sermon on the Mount*, Cosimo Rosselli (1481-82)

I had a fascinating conversation earlier this week with someone who is unable to worship here, but who faithfully reads the sermons online each week. He said to me, “Dave, I think you had a good, strong message about fasting last week, but to be honest, I wish you would have gone a little harder. You didn’t leave me *wanting* to fast. I’m not sure it sounded all that attractive.”

Listen: I don’t really want you to be a person who just *loves* fasting, or is proud of the fact that you prayed an extra thirty seconds yesterday, or that you bought the homeless guy a sandwich. I mean, those are good things – but they’re not the point. The point is that I want you to be a person who is like Jesus. Fasting and praying and giving are all merely exercises that allow us to get to be that way – they are not ends in themselves. I am happy to teach you more about doing any of those things – but not because they are somehow super attractive to us.

I get piles of advertising material for youth and children’s curriculum and retreat centers and special events. I wish I had a nickel for every time I read the words “awesome” or “dynamic” or “intense” or “thrilling” in the context of advertisement for church youth events. I hate it.

Maybe you should come to the CHUP youth group some time. Those words are not always the fairest way to describe what we do or how we do it. Sometimes, youth group is boring. Sometimes, we play games that bomb. Often, we sing songs that are corny. There are lots of nights where youth group isn’t “awesome” or “thrilling”.

Even if you’ve never been to the CHUP youth group, you probably believe me when I say that, because, well, lots of you have been bored to tears in this very room. You’ve been irritated by other people’s children and frustrated at having to endure songs that you didn’t get to select. And

don't even get me started on how hard these pews are, how cold it is in February or how hot it is in July.

And yet, here you are. Why?

Because none of that is why you are here. As a kid, when your mom dies or your parents divorce or a classmate overdoses, you're not looking for "awesome" or "intense" when you come to youth group. And when the rest of you get a call about your plant shutting down or have high hopes for your kids that are dashed or get that horrible call from the doctor's office or have to come up with a framework to think about racism or ethnic violence, well, the songs that we sing here or the noise that those kids make suddenly look a lot less important than the destination of faithful living to which we are traveling together.

You know this: we are not here to be entertained (and that's a good thing for you, Carver!).

We are here because we think that this is the best place to be molded, reminded, nagged, prompted, prodded, or encouraged into following Jesus a little longer or a little better.

And you know this: that sometimes following Jesus can look a lot like a slow, boring advance in righteousness.

And that's OK.

Jesus is not here to flirt with us, and he doesn't have much time for people who are merely looking to be coy with him. Jesus came in order to give all of himself for all of creation in the expectation that we would do the same for him, for each other, and for our neighbor.

We praise God for the times that the life of discipleship is "awesome"!

More importantly, we praise God for the process of discipleship that equips us to do hard things, to grow fruit in each season, and to hear and act on what we have heard. May our lives this week be an opportunity to exercise our faith in the hopes that we look and act a little more like Jesus. Thanks be to God. Amen.