

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

**Sermon Series:** Life, the Jesus Way  
(Studies in the Sermon on the Mount)

**A Matter of the Heart**  
(Matthew 5:27-32)

Study #5

### **Introduction: The up-sides of sugar...**

These days, sugar is getting a bad rap. Other sweeteners have been attacked, too. But today, people are blaming sugar for everything from cancer to obesity to heart disease to a shortened lifespan.

However, sugar has its advocates and these advocates say “NOT” to these accusations and they shout sugar’s benefits.

According to some rigorous research carried out by The Sugar Association, sugar can improve skin health, provide an instant boost of energy, improve brain function, and ease depression. (And who would argue with research done on sugar by The Sugar Association? ☺ )

Now I’m no doctor and I don’t do chemistry. I’m not going to debate the possible benefits of a reasonable amount of sugar in a diet. The unassailable reality, though, is that sugar is terribly abused in our society today.

From what study I have done, eating the amount and type of sugar that you would get from normal portions of fruit is good for you. But eating that much sugar is not what we Americans are taking in.

Eating this much sugar would involve something like twenty-five pounds of sugar per year. Compared with worldwide studies, that’s a lot of sugar.

But depending on which source you consult, the “added sugar intake” of an average American amounts to anywhere from just over sixty pounds per person per year to upwards of one hundred and fifty pounds per year. That is a description of a disaster.

Sugar is found in fruits. Sugar is a part of the good creative order of God. It is a part of the creation about which He said, “***It is good.***” It is the misuse of this good gift that is the problem.

And...sex is a good gift of God. Like sugar, sex was a part of the creation that heard “***It is good***” from the Creator. The Bible portrays sex as that good gift and it celebrates it.

God blessed the “one-flesh” relationship of the first couple in the Garden of Eden. Jesus repeated the blessing and so did the Apostle Paul. The book of the Song of Solomon is a romantic and a delicately erotic book and so are some passages in the book of Proverbs (notably, chapter 5).

But everywhere the Bible celebrates sexual union it does so when the context is the covenant marriage relationship between a man and a woman. Sexual intimacy in any other setting (to reference sugar) is a disaster.

Married sexual union is sacred, delightful, and blessed. I’ve preached sermons on it. So has Jeff. This is not that sermon. This morning we’ll listen as Jesus warns disciples against sexual sin and calls us to sexual purity.

*Review...*

We have heard Him say that you’re blessed, that the favor of God rests on you and that true satisfaction is yours, if you’ll embrace your spiritual poverty. He says that enduring persecution for His sake is the ticket to kingdom greatness.

All of His Beatitudes let us see the world through God-colored lenses. Gentleness and mercy and purity of heart don’t always win the day here and now, but they will there and then.

God smiles when we make peace in a violent, strife-torn world and He will reward us for feeding an appetite for righteousness.

And it is specifically to our appetites that Jesus now turns as He does again what we saw Him do last Sunday.

Then, He re-interpreted and re-applied the law against murder (“**You shall not murder**”) as being, fundamentally, a law given to promote love and to protect relationships. Now He considers another one of the Ten Commandments.

### **The Law Says (v. 27)**

#### **The Commandments**

**[27] “You have heard that it was said...”**

Before, it was, **[21] “You have heard that the ancients were told...”**, highlighting that the law against murder has stood for a very, very long time. Here, “**You have heard...**” highlights the widespread knowledge of the law He is about to address.

His audience was thoroughly Jewish and every Jew had grown up with the Ten Commandments, knew them, and revered them. The Law regulated their society.

But then, all of us also know these Ten Commandments, too. These Commandments have shaped Western civilization. We take these commands as seriously and are about as familiar with them as that group that was listening to the Sermon on the Mount.

So here it is.

#### **This Commandment**

**[27] “You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY’”<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> This morning I will say something about the patriarchal society in which Jesus lived, the understandable male-centric comments He makes, and the applicability

#### *A prohibition commandment*

This command is a prohibition. Most of the Ten Commandments were prohibitions, though not all.

The 4<sup>th</sup> commandment is positive. **[Exodus 20:8] Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.** That is a command to rest on the seventh day, based on God’s having taken a rest at the end of His work of creation on the seventh day.<sup>2</sup>

The 5<sup>th</sup> commandment is to **[Exodus 20:12]...honor your father and your mother.** That’s positive. This is something that we are to do.

All the other commandments, though, are negative. They all erect walls against certain behaviors. This 7<sup>th</sup> commandment is a prohibition against something. God prohibits adultery.

#### *The behavior that is prohibited*

In most human cultures around the world and throughout time, the marriage relationship is foundational. Marriage is the building block of the family, and the family really is the fabric that holds societies together.

Understandably, then, laws that look just like the Jews’ 7<sup>th</sup> Commandment are found among the law codes of most modern and ancient cultures.

Adultery is the act of a married person voluntarily entering into physical intimacy with someone other than his or her spouse.

It is prohibited. There is no ambiguity to the command. It is a clear, flat-out prohibition. No loopholes or exceptions.

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of His words to both men and women. But isn’t it interesting that the 7<sup>th</sup> commandment is not restricted to men?

<sup>2</sup> God’s rest is the rationale for the Sabbath in Exodus. In Deuteronomy, where the Law is re-stated, Moses gives as the reason for the Sabbath that the people of God didn’t get a rest during their time of slavery in Egypt.

Today, three thousand and five hundred years after Moses, we understand and accept this boundary.

*We “get” and accept this boundary*

Adultery is wrong and it’s wrong on so many levels. It violates the “one-flesh” union and the intimacy God designed that the husband and wife, alone, would enjoy.

Adultery destroys marriage, which destroys a family and a home, which leads to the destruction of a culture.

The rabbi’s in Jesus’ day tended to view adultery as wrong because it involved (from a male point of view) “stealing” another man’s wife. The rabbis tended to limit their concern to the overt act.

Someone could conclude that since he (or she) was not guilty of the actual act of having sex with someone outside of marriage, he (or she) had nothing to be concerned about with respect to the 7<sup>th</sup> commandment.

Actually, that would have always been wrong thinking. And Jesus is not going to allow that thinking to stand. So, again (as we saw last Sunday), Jesus doesn’t contradict God’s Law, but He does follow up the quote of the Law with a **“But...”**

Let’s listen carefully here. This is Jesus calling us, His followers, to deeper discipleship. He is giving His own deeper, insightful, perceptive take on **“You shall not commit adultery.”**

## Jesus Says (vv. 28-32)

### **The Heart of Adultery (v. 28)**

*Expanding the commandment’s reach*

#### The lustful look...

**[28] “but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman<sup>3</sup> with lust for her...<sup>4</sup>”**

MOMENT FOR CONTEXT...

Jesus restricts His comments to men looking at women. And, given the context and culture in which He lived, it is understandable that He would do this.

While women were esteemed in Jewish culture, women did not have the freedoms and opportunities - for good and bad - that men had. The ancient world was very patriarchal.

Given, though, that the Bible does have things to say about women behaving immorally and given our own more egalitarian society, it is perfectly legitimate to broaden the application of what Jesus is saying here to women.

I think it is also perfectly legitimate to apply His words outside of the narrow definition of “adultery” to include all sexual intimacy between two people who are not married to each other.

THE PROBLEM OF THE LUSTFUL LOOK

Having said that, Jesus identifies the lustful look as a central obstacle to sexual purity.

<sup>3</sup> “Γυνή” in Greek can refer to a woman or to a wife.

<sup>4</sup> The Greek phrasing would allow the translation “with the purpose of lusting...” (προσ + the infinitive). Jesus is clearly speaking against the purposeful, intentional choice to gaze lustfully. How appropriate for our - digitally and otherwise - visually stimulated culture.

At issue is the man who purposefully, intentionally, chooses to feed a desire for a woman to whom he is not married.<sup>5</sup>

Lust implies something more than temptation. Temptation isn't sin and every one of us knows what it is to be tempted - sexually or otherwise. Jesus was tempted<sup>6</sup> and He never sinned. Temptation is an attack, often unexpected, from the blind side.

King David was tempted when He looked out from the rooftop of his palace and saw Bathsheba bathing. We know that she was faithfully fulfilling her obligation to purify herself by bathing, no doubt in the privacy of her own courtyard.

David saw her, was tempted - and didn't look away. He was tempted and he lusted and he then committed adultery.

James tells us that sin follows a predictable pattern. We are tempted when we give in to our lusts. Once lust is conceived, it gives way to sin. That's what happened to David and it can happen to any of us.

The great Reformer, Martin Luther, is said to have said, *"You can't keep the birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair."*

Temptation is the birds flying overhead. Lust is allowing the birds to build a nest.

Today, an appeal to sex is used to sell everything from beer to cars to toothpaste to hamburgers. Movies and TV shows blatantly tempt us to sexual lust through the portals of the eye.

These temptations are abundantly available. They are everywhere - billboards, computer screens, phones - you name it.

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<sup>5</sup> William Barclay: "The man who is condemned is the man who deliberately uses his eyes to awaken his lust, the man who looks in such a way that passion is awakened and desire deliberately stimulated."

<sup>6</sup> Hebrews 4:15 describes Jesus as a high priest who has been tempted *"in all things"* as we are. I take it, then, that Jesus knew sexual temptation.

We virtually cannot avoid sexual temptation - virtually or otherwise. We can, though, avoid lust.

To *lust* is to feed a desire for something not rightfully yours. And the lust Jesus is addressing is the look that intends to fuel sexual desire.

Now, I believe that there is a minor point Jesus is making and a major one. I'm going to say something about the minor one, first, which is actually REALLY important.

### ... is adulterous

#### THE WAY OF WISDOM

The Lord is certainly affirming that if we take the first step of lust, we will much more likely take the second, which will make the third even more likely, leading, finally, to an overt act of adultery with someone to whom we are not married.

Just as He said that giving in to anger is like taking the first step on the path to murder, so giving in to lust reliably leads to terrible outcomes. If someone continually feeds lust, it will inevitably lead to acting out in damaging ways.

Adultery is an act that is conceived in the imagination. And it is well worth reflecting on where the path that a lustful preoccupation will take you. It will lead to disaster. (See James 1:15.)

There is great wisdom here. But I believe that Jesus is saying much more about lust than that it will lead to sin. Had He wanted to simply say, *"Don't lust. It will lead to sin,"* He would not have said what He did say the way He said it.

#### THE WAY OF DEATH

***[28] "but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart."***

Jesus looks past the behavior to the heart and says that the lustful look, itself, is sinful.

The intentional thought, the mulling over, the fueling of desire and the consideration of doing something that is off limits, is morally wrong. To lust is to commit the sin of adultery *“in [the] heart.”*

And we shouldn't be surprised. Not only because Jesus always went to the heart of a matter, but because the Ten Commandments were transparently, from the beginning, clearly about the heart and not just about adherence to a set of external rules.

This is clear from several of the commands, but especially the 10<sup>th</sup>, the command to not covet. (Exodus 20:17)

There, God forbids His people from coveting (lusting after!) a neighbor's house, his wife, his servants, livestock, or possessions. All of this unmistakably is speaking to heart issues.

According to Jesus, someone could say, *“I have not committed adultery”* - and still be guilty of adultery.

The primary point is *not* that if we lust we will eventually sin. The main point is *exactly* that if we lust we have committed adultery, only not with the body but in the heart.

A flower on a tomato plant isn't as tasty as the ripe, red fruit. But it's still a tomato. And fantasized immorality - while it does damage - may not be as damaging to a man's world as physical immorality. But it's still sinful in the sight of God.

And all of this alerts us who follow Jesus to a category of life we may not have considered before.

*Sin in the behavior; sin in the heart*

When we think of sin, it is tempting to think in terms of behavior. Things we say. Things we do. And it's not wrong to think in those terms.

But sin's tentacles reach deeper than our words and deeds. Sin runs as deep as the heart. (Jeremiah 17:9)

And in our pursuit of purity we miss the mark if we aim only at behavior. Of course Jesus wants to change our behavior. But He's out to do a deeper work than that. He wants to purify our hearts of sin, too.<sup>7</sup>

He provides us with two word pictures that help us see just how critical is the pursuit of purity, body and soul, flesh and heart.

### The Heart of the Disciple

*Figures of speech*

***[29] “If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. [30] “If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell.”***

### The stakes involved

#### A LOSS BEFORE GOD

There are at least a couple of ways to understand what Jesus is saying here. No matter how we take His words, what He is saying is obviously drastic.

The word we translate **“hell”** here is the Greek word *“gehenna.”* Gehenna is the name of a valley located just outside the city walls of Jerusalem (The Valley of Hinnom).

What we think Jesus wants us to imagine by the picture of this valley will determine what we think His message is.

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<sup>7</sup> It was Larry Crabb who first awakened me to the presence of sin in the heart in his book, Inside Out. I highly recommend this book. Crabb invites the reader into a biblically-informed, reflective way of living, asking God to reveal areas of sin that are not immediately observable. I have found the Holy Spirit very willing to identify sin in my heart when I ask Him to. (See Psalm 139:23-24)

Here's one thought.

In Old Testament times, the Valley of Hinnom was sometimes used for idolatrous worship - and even for child sacrifice - during periods of great apostasy. Because of this practice the prophet Jeremiah referred to this valley as the place where the wicked would be judged by God.

So, it may have been that Jesus wants us to think of God's condemnation and punishment when He says "gehenna."<sup>8</sup>

But there may be another thought going on.

There are some who believe that the Valley of Hinnom was used as a garbage dump. They think that when Nehemiah mentioned the Dung Gate/Refuse Gate, he was referring to the gate that led to this valley where the Jerusalem residents would take their garbage.

In ancient garbage pits, there were always fires burning, awful smells, rotting things. They were pretty ghastly places.<sup>9</sup>

And if that is the image Jesus wants us to have of "*gehenna*" the reference would not be to condemnation by God, but to a wasted, garbage dump kind of life.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, if the intended image is of a garbage dump, the point is that our lives will be wasted AND even that we will suffer loss of reward at the Judgment Seat of Christ if we don't pursue purity.<sup>11</sup>

If the reference is to God's judgment, well, the point is a big, proverbial "duh."

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<sup>8</sup> See Jeremiah 7:29-32; 32:35. Also, see 2 Kings 16:3; 21:6; Ezekiel 16:20-21 for the instances of idolatry that prompted Jeremiah's prophecy.

<sup>9</sup> Rabbi David Kimhi (writing from Europe about 1200 AD) was the first person to reference the Valley of Hinnom as a garbage dump. Despite this, I have found no solid archaeological evidence that the Valley of Hinnom was ever used as such.

<sup>10</sup> Fire is certainly an image the Apostle Paul used when describing the judgment believers will pass through (See 1 Corinthians 3).

<sup>11</sup> So Jody Dillow in Final Destiny.

OF COURSE it would be better to go to heaven with one hand than to retain both hands but to suffer eternal separation from God.<sup>12</sup> (Personally, I'm a bit more drawn to the idea that Jesus is speaking about gehenna proverbially, as the big "of course".)

Whichever image Jesus wants us to think of, there is no missing that the stakes for the pursuit of purity are high.

Failure involves a loss before God. But that's not all. Failure also will involve a loss in - or perhaps of - a marriage.

#### THE LOSS OF MARRIAGE

I don't think it is at all surprising that as Jesus speaks of adultery and lust He brings up the matter of divorce.

Matthew 5:31-32 are not Jesus' or the Bible's exhaustive teaching on marriage, divorce, or remarriage. There are other passages that speak to these themes, in the Gospels and elsewhere.<sup>13</sup>

But I believe that the tie-in between what He has just said and what He says here (vv. 31-32) is that sexual sin can be the *cause* and the *result* of divorce.

Now I say what I'm about to say with the understanding that lots of marriages have suffered due to sexual sin. The intimate life of a marriage is the source of much delight and of much pain. That's why Jesus speaks so pointedly. It's also why I'm speaking so pointedly.

It's no secret that sexual sin has been the cause of countless divorces. The break of trust and the loss of the unique intimacy between a husband and a wife is always devastating.

By God's grace, some marriages survive adultery - of body and of the heart.

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<sup>12</sup> Remember, though, that Jesus is speaking to saved individuals who need not fear the eternal condemnation of God.

<sup>13</sup> See Matthew 19; Mark 10; Luke 16; 1 Corinthians 7.

I've witnessed some of these and a redeemed marriage is a beautiful testimony to God's power *and* to a husband's and a wife's commitment to each other and to Him.

Today, divorce is tragically frequent. When there is chronic immoral behavior or when abusive behavior is involved, it is understandable, but it's still tragic.

If I'm understanding what Jesus is saying here, when divorce occurs for lesser causes, that divorce will often involve the formerly married in adultery.

***[31] "It was said, 'Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'<sup>14</sup> [32] "But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."***

(Remember, Jesus was addressing a highly patriarchal society. In His day, a wife was not free to initiate divorce. The husband alone had the legal right to divorce and that is why He says what He says the way He does. In our context His words would apply to a woman who initiates a divorce as well as to a man.)

Depending on which rabbi's teaching a man followed, he might divorce his wife for "*unchastity*"<sup>15</sup> (a very serious moral failure) or for something as trivial as burning breakfast.

If it was the latter - something trivial - Jesus would not have legitimized the divorce. But the wife, needing security, would have been forced out of necessity to marry again. The Lord says that the hard-hearted husband has forced his wife into adultery.

And that husband who divorced his wife for some trivial reason (something other than "*unchastity*") and married again also committed adultery because God viewed him as still married to his first wife.<sup>16</sup>

If you're listening to all this and thinking, "*What a mess!*" I'm thinking, "*Good. Mission: Accomplished.*"

God's plan for marriage has always been that a man and a woman be united in a one-flesh relationship, for life.

Once sexual sin gets thrown into the mix, previously unimaginable options are considered - including divorce. Once there is a divorce, the likelihood of further sexual sin increases.

For that reason, Jesus' recommended solution for dealing with the problem of sexual sin is extreme. Again.

#### The recommended solution

***[29] "If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. [30] "If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell."***

He speaks of cutting off a hand<sup>17</sup> or gouging out an eye<sup>18</sup>, if it is either one that is causing the problem that leads to lust.

The message is, "*Whatever it is - what you see or what you do - that is feeding lust - amputate!*"

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<sup>16</sup> The focus here is on the wrong that is perpetrated against the wife by the husband.

<sup>17</sup> For the hand as a euphemism for the male organ, see Isaiah 57:8. It was likely this understanding that prompted the church father, Origen, to cut off his organ. Some rabbis considered adultery a theft of another man's wife, theft being committed by the hand.

<sup>18</sup> For the eye as the source of moral problems, see Numbers 15:39; Proverbs 21:4; Ezekiel 6:9; 18:12; 20:8

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<sup>14</sup> The "certificate" (see Deuteronomy 24) was required so that a divorce was finalized, preventing the treatment of women as chattel, where they could be sent back and forth from one man to another and back again.

<sup>15</sup> The word is "porneia" and refers to a general uncleanness. It could be adultery or something else, sexual or otherwise, but something very serious.

And yes, Jesus is speaking figuratively.

Jesus is using overstatement to highlight how important the pursuit of purity is.

And the reason we can all know that Jesus is speaking figuratively is because if a man with a sin problem cuts off a hand, he can still do sinful things with the other one. If he loses one eye, he can still look lustfully with the other one.

The problem is cardiac, and we're not going to amputate our heart. But I can protect my heart. You and I can ask God to change our hearts.

So if the application is not physical amputation, what are we to do with this exhortation? Jesus' point is simple to understand, but far from easy to put in practice. When we find ourselves faced with the temptation to sin, sexually, we are to eradicate the source of the temptation, quickly and decisively.

*Speaking plainly...*

This past week, I sought the help of some friends as I was thinking my way through Jesus' words here in Matthew 5. I asked these men what they do to actively pursue purity and to resist temptation. I wasn't surprised that I got great, practical, wise responses.

- One told me that he has installed an app on his phone that blocks all suspect sites (Mobicip is useful for all mobile devices and it works for all ages; Covenant Eyes is a resource used by many).
- Another guy told me that he mostly stays off of social media and doesn't spend time mindlessly surfing the internet.
- One has made the decision to not look at his phone after his wife is asleep.
- A couple of them talked about staying transparent and honest with their wives about temptations they face.

My brothers, what do you do to protect your heart from the temptation to lust? My sisters, what are you doing to protect your heart from the temptation to lust and to pursue purity?

- Do you limit your online life to things that are edifying?
- Do you purposefully avoid the lingering look at those who are not your wife? Your husband?
- Have you altered your daily commute so as to avoid that billboard or that place of business?
- Have you taken advantage of the many online resources that will provide reading material and practical tips on recovery? (I would recommend [www.bebroken.com](http://www.bebroken.com), a grace-filled site that is focused on re-building broken lives)

All of these will provide great help. But I'd like to conclude by suggesting two parallel paths to travel to find help in your fight for purity. And then I'll wrap up with words from Jesus that will leave us all with a compelling vision of hope and glory.

First, seek the searching and the convicting work of the Holy Spirit.

### **Conclusion:**

*Seek the searching and convicting work of the Holy Spirit*

Psalm 139 is one of King David's better known psalms. It is a tremendous psalm that tells us of God's power and presence in our lives. Just listen as I read the final words of this psalm:

***[23] Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
Try me and know my anxious thoughts;  
[24] And see if there be any hurtful way in me,  
And lead me in the everlasting way.***

Here is God's man - David - asking God to reveal to him anything about him that is hurtful, sinful, wayward. David believed that God would let him know where he was veering off course if he asked Him to.

You and I can be assured that God will let us know our hurtful ways, too, when we ask Him to show us.

We may be unaware of some of our hurtful ways. We may not see where we are opening up a gate for temptation to slip through. God will provide His searching flashlight to light the way into the dark places where we might be tempted to sin.

Would you ask God to reveal any darkneses in your life? Would you then, in His presence, repent of them, and then ask Him to guide you into the light of holiness?

Second, avail yourself of the power of community.

*Avail yourself of the strength of community*

The Body of Christ is a source of strength and support as we follow the path of discipleship.

One of the friends who responded to my question this week wrote back that he had found great help in having an accountability partner. Amen.

I have far to go in my pursuit of purity. But I wouldn't have come as far as I have without many brothers who have, through the years, been willing to ask me the hard questions, listen to my struggles, pray with and for me, encourage and reprove me.

God knew exactly what He was doing when He created the church. You will find wise and strong support in the family of God. In the battle for sexual purity, rest assured that your friends in Christ will cheer you on every step of the way.

So if you do not currently have a friend or two or three to whom you can go to confess, to find support and accountability, would you please take a courageous step and tell the truth to a brother (if you are male) or to a sister (if you are female) this week? Today?

*Embrace a compelling vision!*

For all kinds of reasons, moral purity is worth the fight.

It's worth it to gain the respect of your wife. It's worth it to provide a model to your sons and daughters. It's worth it to gain - not pride! - but a clear conscience. And so much more.

Jesus holds out this promise.

***[Matthew 5:8] "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."***

That is a blessing worth pursuing for all we're worth!