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Matthew 5:27–30—Plucking Out Eyes and Cutting Off Hands (Tradition and Literature)

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says,

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’
But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust
has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right
eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for
you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be
thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it
off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your
members than for your whole body to go into hell. (Matt. 5:27–
30)

A similar passage occurs in Mark in a different context:

“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little
ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great
millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into
the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better
for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to
hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to
stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to
have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes
you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the
kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be

thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched. (Mark 9:42–48)

So in Matthew's Gospel Jesus says that his followers should take extreme measures to avoid committing sins such as adulterous lust, and in Mark's Gospel he says that they should take extreme measures to avoid causing others to stumble.

(Almost) Literal Interpretation

A few interpreters have taken Jesus's words literally, believing that they can prevent sin by cutting off parts of their body. However, it was soon discovered that hands, feet, and eyes are not the main culprits in leading a man to lust. Thus some religious extremists have practiced self-castration as a means to purify themselves from unwanted sexual desires. Matthew 19:12 is often cited in support of such an interpretation ("there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven").

The most famous self-made eunuch in church history would be Origen (ca. 184–253), a very prominent early Christian theologian and biblical scholar. The fourth-century historian Eusebius reports that Origen castrated himself, but the accuracy of that report is now contested. Some historians claim the action would not fit well with Origen's expressed ideas and they suspect Eusebius was duped into reporting a rumor that had been circulated by Origen's detractors. Others find no good reason to deny the truth of Eusebius's claims.

Metaphorical Interpretations

The recommendation to pluck out eyes or cut off hands or feet has usually been taken symbolically, but what then would be the point?

Augustine (354–430) suggests that “whatever it is that is meant by the ‘eye’ undoubtedly it is such a thing as is ardently loved. For those who wish to express their affection strongly are wont to speak thus: I love him as my own eyes . . . so that the left is indeed a beloved counsellor” (“Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount,” 1.13.37–38).¹

William Tyndale (1494–1536) says, “This is not meant of the outward members [literal body parts] . . . But it is a phrase or speech of the Hebrew tongue, and will that we cut off occasions, dancing, kissing, riotous eating and drinking, and the lust of the heart, and filthy imaginations, that move a man to concupiscence.”²

Thus one may need to give up relationships (Augustine) or activities (Tyndale) that prove to be an impediment to spiritual purity.

John Calvin (1509–64) summarizes, “Christ in hyperbole bids us prune back anything that stops us offering God obedient service, as He demands in His law” (*Commentary on Matt.* 5:29–30).

Literary Allusions

The image has captured the attention of many authors and poets.³

In “A Shropshire Lad,” **A. E. Houseman** (1859–1936) writes,

If it chance your eye offend you,

Pluck it out, lad, and be sound;
'Twill hurt, but here are salves to friend you,
And many a balsam grows on ground!
And if your hand or foot offend you,
Cut it off, lad, and be whole;
But play the man, stand up and end you,
When your sickness is in your soul.

In *Gone with the Wind*, by **Margaret Mitchell** (1900–1949), Rhett Butler says of his father, “Everyone admired him tremendously for having cut me off and counted me as dead. ‘If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out!’ I was his right eye, his oldest son, and he plucked me right out with a vengeance” (chap. 43).

1. P. Schaaf et al., eds., *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 1st series, 14 vols. (New York: Christian Literature, 1887–94), 6:16.
2. William Tyndale. “An Exposition upon the Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Chapters of Matthew,” in *The Works of the English Reformers: William Tyndale and John Frith*, Vol. 2, ed. Thomas Russell (London: Ebenezer Palmer, 1881), 285.
3. See David Lyle Jeffrey, ed., *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 371–72.