

“Keep Your Promises” (Matthew 5:27–37)

A young Bosnian couple was incredibly unhappy with their marriage. Consequently, Adnan and Sana each turned to online chat forums. Adnan chatted online at work, and Sana chatted from an Internet café. Each spouse found a willing online listener with whom they shared their marriage problems. Adnan and Sana felt loved, nurtured, encouraged, and understood. Both spouses felt that they had finally found their real soul mate. Eventually they decided to meet up with their online chat partner. They arranged to meet outside a shop and both would be carrying a single rose so they would know the other. Shock of all shocks, Adnan and Sana discovered that their perfect partner was their own spouse. (Adnan was chatting with “Sweetie” and Sana was chatting with “Prince of Joy.”) Instead of reconciling and rediscovering their love, both are filing for divorce—with each accusing the other of being unfaithful.¹

What a sad, but true story. This Bosnian couple failed to keep their promises to one another. Their Internet affair wasn’t something that just happened overnight. It was a case of “internal affairs” stemming from restless hearts. In Matthew 5:27–37, we will discover that, “*Integrity is a heart matter.*” Jesus explains that if we are to be people of integrity we must control our hearts and our minds. He provides two means by which God’s people can be people of integrity.

1. Deal radically with your passions (5:27–32). Jesus compels us to do whatever it takes to be men and women of purity. In 5:27 He states, “**You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY.’**” Jesus quotes the seventh commandment, in Exod 20:14 (cf. Deut 5:17).² Upon hearing these words, Jesus’ audience must have felt pretty smug. Jesus, however, shocks His listeners by raising the bar on their ancient sexual standards. In 5:28 He declares, “**But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery³ with her in his heart.**”⁴ Jesus’ words make it clear that adultery is not limited to the physical act.⁵ Looking lustfully at another woman breaks the bond of oneness that a man has with his wife. This goes against the familiar statement used by husbands and wives, “You can look, but don’t touch.” Jesus says, “Don’t look and don’t touch!” It is important to note the word “look” (*blepo*).⁶ This word is a present tense participle that can be translated “keeps looking.” Jesus is not talking about a glance; He is talking about a gaze. The first look doesn’t get us into trouble. It’s the second look. It’s the third look. It’s that case of whiplash as you walk about in the mall or that prolonged look in the rearview mirror while you are driving.

But let’s be very clear: Sexual desire was given to us by God and is portrayed in the Bible as a good gift. Admittedly, the gift is often labeled “Handle with Care,” but sexual desire comes from God.⁷ There is no sin in sexual attraction. It is not wrong to notice physical beauty in the opposite sex, but it is wrong to take that person to bed in our minds. We are constantly “on” as sexual beings. It’s not a matter of choice; it’s a matter of being human.⁸ In today’s world, attractive men and women are everywhere. You can’t escape it! Everywhere you look there is temptation lurking. To complicate matters, Satan takes what was intended to be good—sex in the context of marriage—and tempts us to use God’s gift outside of marriage. Granted, you can’t stop Satan from tempting you, but you can put a stop to the temptation at precisely that point. Martin Luther (1483–1546) said it well, “You can’t stop a bird from flying over your head, but you can stop that bird from building a nest in your hair.” You can say, “I will not think about that. I will not entertain that possibility.”

At my former church I was close friends with a former elder who farmed for a living. One day as we were walking around his ranch, we were discussing the power of the mind. My friend said, “Lust is powerful. Even though I am in my eighties, I still struggle with lust and I can’t do anything about it. Although I spend my days working the land, far removed from women, I still live with my mind.” My friend taught me that the most important sex organ is the brain.⁹ Actions, habits, character, and attitudes all start with a thought and thoughts are fostered by what we choose to take into our minds. *Integrity is a heart matter.*

So how can a person control his or her sex drive? This is a question for the ages! Fortunately, Jesus is a step ahead of us. He anticipates this question and provides an answer. In 5:29–30 Jesus says, “**If your¹⁰ 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. If your right¹¹ 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.**”¹² The first issue that must be resolved is: Are these verses figurative or literal? I can assure you that these verses are figurative.¹³ Otherwise, this sermon would be a case of the blind leading the blind. After all, no one is perfect in his or her purity. Now stop and think about these verses. If you were to gouge out your right eye and chop off your right hand, the problem remains. You would still ogle with your left eye and fondle with your left hand. Cutting off your hand or plucking out an eye doesn’t keep you from committing mental adultery. So should you pluck out your left eye and cut off your left hand as well? No! We still have a mind’s eye, and in many ways that is the most dangerous eye of all. Since evil arises in the heart (Matt 15:19), amputation cannot cure lust. Jesus is speaking figuratively, employing a figure of speech called hyperbole, which makes a point through an exaggerated statement.¹⁴ You remember what your mom said: “I’ve told you a million times not to exaggerate.” Christ is not saying, “Cripple yourself”; He is saying, “control yourself!”¹⁵ Take radical steps to deal with your passions. Consider the following suggestions:

- **Recognize you are vulnerable.** Don’t think you are stronger than Samson, godlier than David, or smarter than Solomon. You too can bite the dust sexually (1 Cor 10:12). Make sure you are humble and don’t look down upon those who have failed in the sexual realm.
- **Meditate on Scripture.** Like in football, the best defense is a good offense. Defeating lust requires an all-out, aggressive saturation of our minds with God’s Word.
- **“Flee” temptation.** Twice in the New Testament, we are commanded to “flee” sexual immorality (1 Cor 6:18; 2 Tim 2:22). Don’t try to be a man or woman and stand there and wage war against your flesh. Your flesh will conquer you. If your flesh doesn’t break you down, I can assure you that Satan can and will. Be like Joseph in the Old Testament and flee the scene (Gen 39).
- **Watch your input.** Consider the shows and movies you watch. Take stock of your Internet surfing. Avoid Internet porn like the plague. Ask yourself, “If Jesus were present, would I be watching what I am watching?”
- **Dress thoughtfully.** Modesty is incredibly important. But this works both ways. Guys like to hammer on women for immodest dress, but they will sport tank tops, muscle shirts, and short shorts. This is a double standard. Women may not be as visually stimulated as men but they aren’t dead either. We must guard one another from sin.
- **Tell someone else.** Remember, there is NO sin in being sexually attracted to someone else, but when you mull the attraction over in your mind and fantasize about the person, then you have sinned. Tell a friend of the same sex who you are attracted to and ask for accountability.
- **Maintain eye-contact.** This keeps you from looking a man or woman up and down or allowing your eyes to fall on a particular body part. It also shows proper respect and esteem.
- **Think consequences.** Remember the severe damage that sexual immorality can bring. Sex before marriage or outside of marriage can destroy your marriage and your ministry. Furthermore, it brings shame to God. Don’t allow yourself to go there.

The alternative of not dealing decisively with sexual sin is hell. No one can measure up to this standard. It is better to deal with the issue of sin by acknowledging sin and the One who paid for our sin on the cross. The standard for Jesus’ kingdom is perfection. The only way we can reach perfection is complete forgiveness and justification through Christ. The standard of perfection is God’s own character. If you have been less than perfect sexually speaking, will you receive the forgiveness that Jesus offers? It’s as simple as acknowledging your sin and believing that Jesus’ perfect person and work paid the penalty for your sin. *Integrity is a heart matter.* Let Jesus give you a new heart today.

In 5:31–32, Jesus continues His discussion of what constitutes adultery.¹⁶ Many people assume that Jesus transitions to focusing on divorce; however, His real point is that an unbiblical divorce is the moral equivalent of adultery. Jesus explains: **“It was said, ‘WHOEVER SENDS HIS WIFE AWAY, LET HIM GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE’; but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery [if she remarries];¹⁷ and whoever marries a divorced woman [a woman who has been divorced for something short of unchastity] commits adultery.”**¹⁸ In 5:31, Jesus refers to Deut 24:1–4, which permits divorce for “some indecency” (*ervat davar*). This Hebrew phrase means “nakedness of a thing.” Although this phrase can include adultery,¹⁹ it typically refers to some gross sexual impropriety short of adultery.²⁰ (In the Old Testament an adulterer was stoned to death!) In Israel a man divorced his wife simply by giving her a written statement indicating that he divorced her. It was a domestic matter, not something that went through the courts, and it was quite common. In most cases a divorced woman would remarry another husband, often for her own security. Jesus says that new marriage, whether from the perspective of the divorcee or the one marrying her, is adulterous.²¹ Although a certificate of divorce has been given, Jesus is saying that God does not view the divorce as having occurred. In other words, a certificate of divorce does not annul the marriage. Instead, it causes you to commit adultery. You can’t commit adultery unless you are married. In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus is saying, “Everyone who divorces his wife makes her commit adultery except in the case in which she has already committed adultery herself.” Again, this discussion is not about divorce, but adultery. Jesus forbids divorce except for *porneia* (“unchastity”)²² which is translated “sexual immorality” (ESV, HSB) or “marital unfaithfulness” (NIV). Since “adultery” has already been specified by another word (*moicheuo*; 5:27–28), *porneia* must be something less specific than sexual infidelity but, following the Mosaic intention, more than something frivolous. It is likely that *porneia* includes any sinful activity that intentionally divides the marital relationship. Jesus states unequivocally the sacredness of the marital relationship but allows divorce to protect the non-offending partner and to protect the institution of marriage from being a vulgar sham.²³

Yet, even in the case of *porneia*, reconciliation and forgiveness are always to be the goal in a Christian marriage. If all attempts at reconciliation fail, then divorce is possible; but it is not the first step, and it is not mandatory.²⁴ The spouse that is victimized by adultery or some other deviant form of sexual unfaithfulness may have the right to file for divorce, but he or she is certainly under no obligation to do so. The freedom to divorce was never to be a mere device for “serial monogamy.” Marriage is supposed to serve as a reflection of the faithfulness of God.²⁵ Divorce is a concession by God to the sinfulness of man. God’s ideal is the stability of permanence in marriage. We need to be reminded of this again and again. It is easy to think that our next spouse will make us happy; however, it doesn’t always work out that way. Every person I know who has gone through divorce has experienced greater pain than they imagined. Many seek to relieve their present pain in marriage only to find a greater pain in divorce. This is not to mention the greater social issues such as the harm children suffer for the loss of a parent.

Can I get on a small soapbox for just a moment? Many Christians vehemently oppose homosexual relationships and same-sex marriage on the grounds that it destroys the family. Although, I too adhere to marriage between one man and one woman, I find it disconcerting that Christians aren’t in arms over adultery and divorce among believers. If you look in terms of damage done to the children of America, you cannot compare what the homosexual movement has done to what adultery and divorce has done to this society. In terms of consequences to children, it is not even close!

However, I need to balance these words by urging you to treat those who are divorced with love and respect. It is especially important to be sensitive to those whose marriage was dissolved by their spouse’s unfaithfulness. We must always remember that God’s heart breaks for those who are divorced, who have placed their marriages in peril by succumbing to sinful situations or whose lives have been upended by an unfaithful or irresponsible spouse. We must continually affirm the permanence of marriage while at the same time offering full mercy and forgiveness for those who have suffered from failed relationships²⁶

[Jesus says, “Deal radically with your passions.” This is critical because sexual immorality can destroy your spiritual well-being and your marriage. Jesus now follows His words on adultery with a few choice words on oaths and vows.]

2. Honor your commitments because you are committed (5:33-37). It’s not a coincidence that Jesus’ words on subduing our immoral passions are followed up with words on honoring one’s vows. After all, committing adultery and divorce involves breaking the most solemn vow—marriage. Jesus declares, **“Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, ‘YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FALSE VOWS, BUT SHALL FULFILL YOUR VOWS TO THE LORD.’ But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no’; anything beyond these is of evil”** (5:33-37). In 5:33, Jesus paraphrases several Old Testament passages²⁷ prohibiting the failure to fulfill one’s vows. He also forbids swearing upon anyone or anything to add certainty to one’s oath.²⁸ It is important, however, to recognize that Jesus isn’t suggesting that *all* oaths are wrong.²⁹ In a court of law, a person is operating under the jurisdiction of governing authorities that are trying to establish human norms. To submit to taking an oath is complying with those norms and, by extension, is submitting to God (Rom 13:1–7; cf. Heb 6:16–18).³⁰ Furthermore, the Bible records that God the Father and the apostle Paul swore to impress His truthfulness on people.³¹ Jesus also testified under oath as did Paul.³² So we must dig deeper to determine what was happening in Jesus’ day. Most likely, there was a casual use of oaths. Perhaps people were attaching “in the name of God” or “as God is my witness” to everyday promises—the pledge to buy a cow, the vow to visit a relative, or the commitment to pay a debt.³³ We make false oaths today as well when we say: “I sweaaaaar!” “I swear to God!” “I swear on my mother’s grave!” “I swear on a stack of Bibles!” “I cross my heart and hope to die!” All these attempts at persuasion are fabrications and dishonesty. If we have to use an oath to convince someone of our integrity, we are behind the eight ball from the start.

It has been said, “Oaths arise because men are so often liars.” We live in a world where lying is so commonplace that we don’t know whom to trust. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we ought to be radically different. True speech must be a part of our character. We should not need to confirm our statements with an appeal to a higher authority. Our word should be enough (cf. Jas 5:2). The bottom line is this: We don’t tell the truth because we have taken an oath, we tell the truth because we are truthful.³⁴

When Chris Spielman played for the Buffalo Bills, he was everything a middle linebacker should be: tough, strong and smart, with passion, total commitment and loyalty to the game. He played the entire 1995 season with a torn pectoral muscle that he sustained in the season opener. But football took a distant second place in his thinking during the 1998 season. He chose to stay home. He cooked, took care of his kids, and cared for his wife—by choice. Stefanie, Chris’s wife, was struggling through the stark reality of breast cancer. Surgery, chemotherapy, and nausea were Stefanie’s opponents. During her fight Chris was at her side. He even shaved his head (to match his wife’s hair loss during chemo) to help his kids understand. Spielman’s actions supported his “family before job” credo. When he was asked by a reporter if he’d consider a return to the Bills late in the season Spielman said, “I’d play in a heartbeat, but what kind of man would I be if I backed out on my word to her? I wouldn’t be a man at all.” Football fans saw Spielman as a man because of his aggressive, leave-it-all-on-the-field style of play. But what really makes him a man is his personal sacrifice and unending commitment and loyalty to his wife and children.³⁵

A good test of our credibility starts at home. When you promise your spouse you’ll do something, does he or she believe you? Does your child believe you? Our integrity depends upon our follow-through. Jesus’ disciples were called to be promise keepers. Are you a promise keeper? Have you maintained your purity, not merely physically, but mentally as well? Are you devoted to your spouse for better or worse? Are you a man or woman of your word? Can people count on what you say? *Integrity is a heart matter.*

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Scripture References

Matthew 5:27–37

Job 31:1

Proverbs 6:32–35

Matthew 19:1–9

2 Samuel 13:1–2

Deuteronomy 23:21, 23

Matthew 12:36

Study Questions

1. On a scale of 1-10 (with ten being excellent), how am I doing in the area of purity (5:27–8)? What circumstances produce the greatest level of vulnerability to sexual temptation in my life? Is there anyone that I am currently accountable to? If not, who will I ask to become my accountability partner? If I was mentoring a teenager, how would I advise him or her to remain pure? How would my counsel change if I was counseling a newly married spouse?
2. If sexual sin begins in the mind, what steps can I take to deal with these issues in my thought life (5:29–30)? Oswald Chambers said, “This line of discipline [5:29–30] is the sternest one that ever struck mankind.” In light of Chambers’ remark, what sacrificial steps am I taking to avoid sexual sin? Are there some additional steps that I need to take in light of hearing this sermon? Are there other areas of sin that I am not dealing with or issues in my conscience that I am ignoring? How does sin in other areas affect my ability to resist sexual temptation? What happens when I compartmentalize things in my mind and heart?
3. Would I be committed to my spouse if he or she was sexually unfaithful (5:31–32)? Why or why not? Have I known any couples who have survived infidelity? What I have learned from their experience? Is my marriage motivated more by love or duty? Why are both necessary in the course of a marriage? What stands at the heart of my marriage? What are my spouse and I currently doing to ensure that we remain true to one another?
4. Have I learned how to hurt with people who have suffered through divorce? In the case of a divorce with biblical grounds and an “innocent” party, have I exhibited love and compassion to the person who has been sinned against? In the case of a divorce on unbiblical grounds, have I expressed my biblical concern and exercised tough love?
5. Am I a man or woman of my word (5:33–37)? Why or why not? What recent examples can I cite? What would those who know me best say? Would they say that I am a person of integrity? To what degree do they trust me? Is my word as good as gold? Do I see any commitments I make as an expression of my integrity before God and others?

Notes

- ¹ SermonNews illustration from www.craigslist.org, September 17, 2007.
- ² It is possible that Jesus also alludes to the tenth commandment concerning covetousness (Exod 20:17; Deut 5:21).
- ³ If the woman isn't married and the man isn't married, and they lust for one another, is it still wrong? Technically, it can't be adultery if neither is married. Here we are dealing with technicalities again. The self-righteous Pharisees were the fathers of such technicalities. But Jesus also uses the Greek word *porneia* (Matt 15:19; Mark 7:21), translated "fornications" (KJV) or "sexual immorality" (NIV), that is, "unlawful sexual intercourse, prostitution, unchastity, fornication," applied in the NT to all kinds of illicit sexual conduct inside and outside of marriage. (See BDAG s.v. *porneia* 1.) We can't get off that easily.
- ⁴ Carson points out that the Greek text of Matt 5:28 can be translated with a bit different slant. It could be that the man looks at a woman "so as to get her to lust." Carson adds, "The man is therefore looking at the woman with a view to enticing her to lust. Thus, so far as his intention goes, he is committing adultery *with her*, he makes her an adulteress." Donald A. Carson, "Matthew." *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Edited by Frank E. Gaebel and J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), Electronic ed. See also Michael Eaton, *The Way that Leads to Life* (Great Britain: Christian Focus, 1999), 74–75.
- ⁵ See the powerful analogy of marital faithfulness in Prov 5:15–23.
- ⁶ Jesus uses *blepo* ("look") five times in this sermon (Matt 5:28; 6:4, 6, 18; 7:3).
- ⁷ Haddon W. Robinson, *What Jesus Said About Successful Living* (Grand Rapids: RBC, 1991), 133.
- ⁸ Thomas Long, *Matthew*. Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1997), 58.
- ⁹ See Randy Alcorn, *The Purity Principle* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2003), 42.
- ¹⁰ Jesus again moves from the second-person plural to the second-person singular (cf. Matt 5:23–26).
- ¹¹ Morris notes, "Most people being right-handed, the right side often stood for the more powerful or important side. The eye is the medium through which the temptation first comes to stimulate the lust, and the hand represents the instrument by which the lust is physically committed." Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*. Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 119.
- ¹² As before (Matt 5:23–26), Jesus uses two illustrations to aid our understanding. Jesus' saying in Matt 5:29–30 is also found in Matt 18:9–10 and Mark 9:42–48.
- ¹³ Constable writes, "The reference to cutting off the 'right hand' (v. 30) is also metaphorical, but how symbolic is it? Some take the 'right hand' as a euphemism for the penis (cf. Isa. 57:8). This view has the context in its favor. Others take the right hand literally and view it as the instrument of stealing another man's wife. The radical treatment of parts of the body that cause one to sin has led some like Origen to castrate themselves. But that is not radical enough, since lust is not thereby removed. The 'eye' (v. 29) is the member of the body most commonly blamed for leading us astray, especially in sexual sins (cf. Num 15:39; Prov 21:4; Ezek 6:9; 18:12; 20:8; v. 11. Eccl 11:9); the 'right eye' refers to one's best eye. But why the 'right hand' (v. 30) in a context dealing with lust? This may be merely illustrative or a way of saying that even lust is a kind of theft. More likely it is a euphemism for the male sexual organ (cf. *yad*, 'hand,' most likely used in this way in Isa 57:8 [cf. BDB, s.v., 4.g]; see Lachs, pp. 108f.)."
- ¹⁴ Figures of speech are meant to have an emotional charge, and thus effective. However, figurative language means more, not less. Turner states, "Hyperbole shocks the reader with the real point." David L. Turner, *Matthew*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 171.
- ¹⁵ John Phillips, *Exploring the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 103.
- ¹⁶ The introductory Greek formula, *Errethe* ("It was said") is shorter than all the others in this chapter and is linked to the preceding by the Greek connective *de* ("and").
- ¹⁷ Adultery violates the marriage bond. While most people agree that divorce is permissible in the case of sexual unfaithfulness, some question the implied right to remarry. But Jesus is clearly addressing the issue of one who divorces and "marries another" in Matt 19:9. Therefore, in the case of immorality, it's permissible if someone divorces and marries another person (see Rom 7:2; 1 Cor 7:39). Blomberg states, "Ancient Jews (like Greeks and Romans) almost universally agreed that lawful divorce granted the person the right to remarry." Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*. New American Commentary series (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 111.
- ¹⁸ See also Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount*, Electronic ed.
- ¹⁹ E.g., Lev 18:6–18; 20:11, 17, 20–21; Ezek 20:10; 23:29; Hos 2:10.
- ²⁰ E.g., the term "indecent" (*ervah*) usually has to do only with indecent exposure of the genitals. See also NET Study Notes.
- ²¹ Carson, "Matthew," Electronic ed.

²² This is a poor translation by the NASB since “unchastity” is archaic. In fact, the term is not even recognized in a typical spell checker.

²³ Wilkins, *Matthew*, 246.

²⁴ Wilkins, *Matthew*, 242.

²⁵ Marriage is for the tough and spiritually mature. In Matt 19, after Jesus talked about divorce, His disciples said to Him, “If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry” (19:10).

²⁶ Ken Hemphill, *Empowering Kingdom Growth* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2004), 191.

²⁷ See Exod 20:7; Lev 19:12; Num 30:2; and Deut 5:11; 6:3; 22:21–23.

²⁸ Jesus rejects the use of oaths for at least four reasons. First, oaths require that His disciples speak the truth as a matter of course. Second, people tend to abuse oaths. Third, humans are bound to God in all of life, not just when we call upon God as a witness. Finally, an oath is used to guarantee the truthfulness of a human statement and calls upon God as a supporting witness. David S. Dockery & David E. Garland, *Seeking the Kingdom* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1992), 60–61.

²⁹ Some very conscientious believers have taken Jesus’ words literally and have refused to take an oath of any kind even in court. However, Jesus’ point was the importance of truthfulness. He probably would not have objected to the use of oaths as a formality in legal proceedings.

³⁰ For example, in the earlier days of the U.S. judicial system when a person gave an oath in court, such as, “So help me God,” it provided a standard of judgment. If a person lied under that oath before God, that person was liable to God’s judgment.

³¹ See Gen 9:9–11; Luke 1:68, 73; 2 Cor 1:20; and Gal 1:20. Paul’s readers were not familiar enough with his character to have justifiable trust in his plain statements

³² See Matt 26:63–64; Rom 1:9; 2 Cor 1:23; 1 Thess 2:5, 10.

³³ Long, *Matthew*, 61.

³⁴ Robinson, *What Jesus Said About Successful Living*, 149.

³⁵ See Rob Bentz in *Sports Spectrum* Magazine. Sadly, Spielman returned to football the following year, only to suffer a career-ending neck injury. See <http://chrisspielman.com/bio.html>.