

LUST

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Lust, of course, could be an inordinate desire for other things—for money or food, for power or praise. But since the historic list of deadly sins includes greed, gluttony, pride, and envy, we will treat lust as a sexual sin. So let's begin with a biblical definition. *Lust is a sexual desire that dishonors its object and disregards God.* Let me show you where I see this definition in 1 Thessalonians 4:1–8.

Brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more.² For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.³ For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality;⁴ that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor,⁵ not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God;⁶ that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you.⁷ For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness.⁸ Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

There are various suggested translations of verses 4-5. The ESV above says, “that each one of you know how to *control his own body* in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God.” The RSV says, “that each one of you know how to *take a wife* for himself in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God.” The NASB says, most literally, “that each of you know how to *possess his own vessel* in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God.” The words in italics translate the same phrase from the original Greek. You can see the reason for the ambiguity. The literal “vessel” could refer to the man’s own sexual organs, or the woman’s. It is not necessary to resolve this issue in order to see the meaning of lust that is common to all of these translations.

LUST DISHONORS ITS OBJECT

Notice that verses 4 and 5 tell us to do something one way, but not another way. Take a wife or control your body/vessel “in holiness and honor, *not* in the passion of lust.” Note the contrast: “in holiness and honor, *not* in the passion of lust.” So the passion of lust is the opposite of holiness and honor. That’s where I get my definition for lust.

Sexual desire in itself is good. God made it in the beginning. It has its proper place. But it was made to be governed, regulated, and guided by two concerns: honor toward the other person and holiness toward God. Lust is what sexual desire becomes when that honor and that holiness are missing.

Take honor, for instance. God established a relationship called marriage, in which one man and one woman make a lifelong covenant to honor each other with faithfulness and love. Sexual desire becomes the servant and the spice of that

covenant bond of mutual honor. Therefore, to say to another person (with or without using words), “I want you to satisfy my sexual desire with you, but I do not want you as a covenant partner in marriage,” basically means, “I want to use your body for my pleasure, but I do not want you as a whole person.” That is dishonoring, and therefore lustful. Lust is sexual desire minus a commitment to honor the other person.

LUST DISREGARDS GOD

But that’s not all. The text says, “in *holiness* and honor, not in the passion of lust.” Sexual holiness has to do with God—being set apart for God. So verse 5 reads, “Not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles *who do not know God*.” Truly knowing God, and acting like it, keeps sexual desire from becoming lust. Verse 8, “whoever disregards [the call for holiness], disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.” The root issue in lust is regard for God. Holiness is living in supreme regard for a holy God.

Lust is the opposite. Lust is sexual desire that is not regulated or governed or guided by a supreme regard for God. God created sexuality. He created it good and beautiful, for the good of his creatures. He alone has the wisdom and the right to tell us how to use it for his glory and our good. Lust is what that sexual desire becomes when we give it rein and disregard God.

In summary, then, lust is a sexual desire that dishonors its object and disregards God. It is the corruption of a good thing by the absence of honorable commitment and by the absence of a supreme regard for God. If your sexual desire is not guided by respect for the honor of others and regard for the holiness of God, it is lust.

THE DEADLY DANGER OF LUST

Now, why does that matter? Why is lust a big deal? Isn't sexual sin, especially when it's just a desire and not an act, sin with a little *s*? Shouldn't we get on with bigger issues like global pandemics, and human trafficking, and terrorist threats, and vast poverty?

Some say sexual attitudes and sexual behavior are a matter of relatively insignificant personal piety. What counts is whether you fight these massive social and global evils. Sexual promiscuity is simply no big deal if you are standing publicly against racial injustice and sex trafficking. Looking at pornography on the internet is utterly insignificant if you are on your way to a consultation on global warming. This is the mindset of millions.

That is the way the human mind reasons when a supreme regard for God has been forsaken. But that is not what God has said. What is God's estimate of how important your sexual life is? Is it a big deal? Verse 6: ". . . that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the *Lord is an avenger in all these things*, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you."

This means that the consequences of lust are going to be as bad, or worse, than the consequences of war. All war can do is kill your body. And Jesus said, "Do not fear those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear. Fear him who after he has killed has power to cast into hell" (Luke 12:4–5). In other words, God's vengeance is much more fearful than earthly annihilation. According to 1 Thessalonians 4:6, God's vengeance is coming upon those who disregard warnings against lust. "The Lord is an avenger in all these things."

LUST AND ETERNAL SECURITY

Some years ago, I spoke to the student body of a Christian high school on the topic, "Ten Lessons for Fighting Lust." Lesson number six was, "Ponder the eternal danger of lust."

My text was Matthew 5:28–29, where Jesus says, "Everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell." I pointed out that Jesus said heaven and hell are at stake in what you do with your eyes, and with your imagination.

After the message, one of the students came up to me and asked, "Are you saying, then, that a person can lose his salvation?" This is exactly the same response I got a few years earlier when I confronted a man about the adultery in which he was living. I patiently tried to understand his situation, and I pled with him to return to his wife. Then I said, "You know, don't you, that Jesus says if you don't fight this sin with the kind of seriousness that is willing to gouge out your own eye, you will go to hell and suffer there forever?" He looked at me in utter disbelief, as though he had never heard anything like this in his life. He said, "You mean you think a person can lose his salvation?"

I have learned again and again from first-hand experience that there are many professing Christians who have a view of salvation that disconnects it from real life. They nullify the warnings of the Bible and put the person who claims to be a Christian, but wages no war against his sin, beyond the reach of biblical threats. Such doctrine is comforting thousands on their way to hell. Jesus said, if you don't fight lust, you won't go to heaven. The stakes are much higher than global terror-

ism. If you don't fight lust, you will not go to heaven (1 Pet. 2:11; Col. 3:6; Gal. 5:21; 1 Cor. 6:10; Heb. 12:14).

JUSTIFYING FAITH IS LUST-FIGHTING FAITH

Are we not, then, saved by faith—by believing in Jesus Christ? Isn't justification by faith alone? Yes, we are indeed saved by faith, and justification is by faith alone. Those who persevere in faith shall be saved (Matt. 24:13; 10:22; 1 Cor. 15:3; Col. 1:23; 2 Thess. 2:13). When God lays hold of us through saving faith, we are moved to lay hold of him. "I press on to make it my own, *because* Christ Jesus has made me his own" (Phil. 3:12). How do you lay hold on eternal life? Paul gives the answer in 1 Timothy 6:12. "Fight the good fight of faith: lay hold on eternal life." We lay hold on eternal life by fighting the good fight of faith. Saving faith is not a momentary thing. It is the act of the saved soul every day. And it is a battle, because Satan wants to destroy it (Luke 22:31–32).

This leads us to our main concern—to show that the fight against *lust* is a battle against *unbelief*. The fight for sexual purity is the fight of faith. The great error that I am trying to explode is that faith in God is one thing and the fight for holiness is another, separate thing—the error that faith gets you to heaven, and holiness gets you rewards. You get your justification by faith, and you get the power for your sanctification by works. You start the Christian life in the power of the Spirit, and you press on in the efforts of the flesh. This is a serious error. . . . Some have said the battle for obedience is optional, because only faith is necessary for salvation.

Our response: the battle for obedience is absolutely necessary for salvation because it is, at root, the fight of faith. The battle against lust is absolutely necessary for salvation because it is the battle against unbelief. Faith alone delivers

from hell, and the faith that delivers from hell is the faith that delivers from lust.

A GREATER GOSPEL

This gospel is a greater gospel than the other. It's the gospel of God's victory over sin, not just his tolerance of sin. It is the gospel of Romans 6:14: "Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace." Almighty grace! Sovereign grace!

*He breaks the power of cancelled sin,
He sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the foulest clean,
His blood availed for me.*

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8). This is God's demand, and this is God's gift. It is all of grace. That is why the decisive fight against lust is the fight of faith—the fight to daily welcome and treasure Christ so fully that temptation to sin loses its power over us. The battle against lust is the battle against unbelief. The fight of faith is the battle to be satisfied in all that God is for us in Jesus. Lust loses its power to the extent we believe in Christ like this.

YOU CAN KNOW GOD—AND NOT KNOW HIM

In 1 Thessalonians 4:5, Paul says, ". . . not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God." Do you see what that implies about the root of lust? Not knowing God is the root cause of lust. Take a wife, or control of your body/vessel, *not* in the passion of lust because that is what people do *who do not know God*.

Paul doesn't mean that mere head knowledge about God overcomes lust. In Mark 1:24, Jesus is about to cast a demon out of a man, when the unclean spirit cries out, "I know who you are, the Holy One of God!" Satan and his hosts have some very accurate *knowledge* about God and Jesus, but that is not the kind of knowledge Paul has in mind here. The knowledge he has in mind is a knowledge of God for the supreme value and beauty that he really is. This kind of knowing is a kind of tasting. "Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good!" (Ps. 34:8). It's the kind of knowledge Paul referred to in 2 Corinthians 4:6—"the light of the *knowledge* of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (see Gal. 4:8; 1 Cor. 2:14; 2 Pet. 1:3-4). It's the soul-recognition of God's greatness and worth and glory and grace and power. It's knowledge that stuns you, and humbles you. It's knowledge that wins you and holds you. It's the kind of knowledge of beauty you don't have when you feel ho-hum during the Hallelujah Chorus, or grumble on the rim of the Grand Canyon. It is possible to hear, and not hear, to see, and not see (Matt. 13:13). That is not the kind of knowledge we need.

True knowledge looks like Lydia's, when the Lord opened the eyes of her heart (Acts 16:14). At one moment you think you will burst with its fullness, and suddenly there is a chasm of longing for more. It's the kind of knowing we call faith—"the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1). It's a knowledge that's so real, so precious, so satisfying to your soul, that any thought, any attitude, any emotion, any addiction which threatens to hinder this knowledge will be attacked with all the spiritual zeal of a threatened life. This is the fight of faith that rages in the godly soul when lust lures the mind away from God.

THE PURE SHALL SEE GOD

I close with an illustration from an article I read years ago, and with a way for preparing to fight. The article was unsigned, but written by a preacher who for ten years was in bondage to lust. He tells the story of what finally released him. It is such a resounding confirmation of what I am trying to say that I want to quote the key paragraph.

He ran across a book by Francois Mauriac called *What I Believe*. In it Mauriac admitted how the plague of guilt had not freed him from lust. He concludes that there is one powerful reason to seek purity, the one Christ gives in the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." The unnamed pastor writes,

The thought hit me like a bell rung in a dark, silent hall. So far, none of the scary, negative arguments against lust had succeeded in keeping me from it But here was a description of what I was missing by continuing to harbor lust: I was limiting my own intimacy with God. The love he offers is so transcendent and possessing that it requires our faculties to be purified and cleansed before we can possibly contain it. Could he, in fact, substitute another thirst and another hunger for the one I had never filled? Would Living Water somehow quench lust? That was the gamble of faith.⁵⁹

It was not a gamble. You can't lose when you turn to God. He discovered this in his own life, and the lesson he learned is absolutely right: The way to fight lust is to feed faith with the knowledge of an irresistibly glorious God.

59 *Leadership*, Fall 1982, 43–44.

ANTHEM: A STRATEGY FOR FIGHTING LUST

Here's the strategy I have used countless times myself in battling the unbelief of lust. With these six steps, I have in mind men *and* women. For men, the crisis is more obvious. The need for warfare against the bombardment of visual temptation to fixate on sexual images is urgent. For women, it is often less obvious, but just as great, especially if we broaden the scope of temptation to food or figure or relational fantasies. What I am focusing on here is the realm of thought, imagination, and desire that leads to sexual misconduct. So here is one set of strategies in the war against wrong desires. I put it in the form of an acronym, ANTHEM.

A—Avoid

Avoid, as much as possible and reasonable, the sights and situations that arouse unfitting desire. I say "possible and reasonable" because some exposure to temptation is inevitable. And I say "unfitting desire" because not all desires for sex, food, and family are bad. We know when the desires are unfitting, unhelpful, and moving toward becoming enslaving. We know our weaknesses and what triggers them. "Avoiding" is a biblical strategy. "Flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness" (2 Tim. 2:22). "Make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (Rom. 13:14). And, of course, this is done out of faith. That is, it is done because we have a superior satisfaction in Christ over all things and we do not want to tempt our fickle hearts beyond what is necessary.

N—No

Say *no* to every lustful thought right away. And say it boldly with the authority of Jesus Christ. "In the name of Jesus, *No!*"

You don't have much more than a few seconds. Give the lustful thought more unopposed time than that, and it will lodge itself with such force as to be almost immovable. Say it out loud, if you dare. Be tough and warlike. As John Owen said, "Be killing sin or it will be killing you." Strike fast and strike hard. "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7).

T—Turn

Turn the mind forcefully toward Christ as a superior satisfaction. Saying "no" will not suffice. You must move from defense to offense. Fight fire with fire. Attack the inferior promises of sin with the superior promises of Christ. The Bible calls lusts "deceitful desires" (Eph. 4:22). They lie. They promise more than they can deliver. The Bible calls them "passions of your former *ignorance*" (1 Pet. 1:14). Only fools yield. "All at once he follows her, as an ox goes to the slaughter" (Prov. 7:22). Deceit is defeated by truth. Ignorance is defeated by knowledge. It must be glorious truth and beautiful knowledge. We must stock our minds with the superior promises and pleasures of Jesus. Then we must turn to them immediately after saying, "No!"

H—Hold

Hold the promise and the pleasure of Christ firmly in your mind until it pushes the other images out. "Fix your eyes on Jesus" (Heb. 12:2). Here is where many fail. They give in too quickly. They say, "I tried to push it out, and it didn't work." I ask, "How long did you try?" A minute? Five? Ten? How long did you make war on this one temptation? How hard did you exert your mind? The mind is a muscle. You can flex it with vehemence. Take the kingdom violently (Matt. 11:12). Be brutal. Hold the promise of Christ before your eyes. Hold it.

Hold it! Don't let it go! Keep holding it! How long? As long as it takes. Fight! For Christ's sake, fight until you win. If an electric garage door were about to crush your child you would hold it up with all your might and holler for help, and hold it and hold it and hold it and hold it. Until it cut your fingers off.

E—Enjoy

Enjoy a superior satisfaction. Cultivate capacities for pleasure in Christ. One reason lust reigns in so many is that Christ has so little appeal. We default to deceit because we have little delight in Christ. Don't say, "That kind of delighting just isn't me." What steps have you taken to waken affection for Jesus? Have you fought for joy? Don't be fatalistic. You were created to treasure Christ with all your heart—more than you treasure sex or sugar or sports or shopping. If you have little taste for Jesus, competing pleasures will triumph. Plead with God for the satisfaction you don't have: "Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days" (Ps. 90:14). Then look, and look, and look at the most magnificent Person in the universe until you see him as supremely magnificent and satisfying as he really is.

M—Move

Move into a useful activity away from idleness and other vulnerable behaviors. Lust grows fast in the garden of leisure. Find good work to do, and do it with all your might. "Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord" (Rom. 12:11). "Be steadfast, immovable, always *abounding* in the work of the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58). Abound in work. Get up and do something. Sweep a room. Hammer a nail. Write a letter. Fix a faucet. And do it for Jesus's sake. You were made to manage and create. Christ died to make you "zealous for good works"

(Titus 2:14). Displace deceitful lusts with a passion for good deeds.

And in between the moments of hand-to-hand combat with lustful thoughts, devote yourself in every way to seeing and savoring the superior worth of Christ. This will be the victory. “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Phil. 3:8).