

Lust and Chastity  
2 Samuel 11:2 – 5, 14 – 17, 26 – 27; Matthew 5:27 – 30, 6:22 – 23  
Sunday, March 24, 2019

Throughout Lent the sermons each week are focusing on one of the Seven Deadly Sins and its corresponding virtue. This is a list that has guided Christians for over 1,500 years, helping us identify not just *acts* that are sinful, but the deeper issues in our lives that we need to turn away *from*, while at the same time giving us something good and life-giving to turn *to*. Lent is a time of repentance and cleansing our lives, dying with Christ in preparation for the new life that his resurrection brings on Easter. Two weeks ago we looked at pride and humility, and last week we looked at envy and kindness.

Today we are going to be looking at lust and chastity. Now, this is understandably a difficult, uncomfortable topic to discuss, so I thought that I would begin by sharing with you a *personal* experience with lust.

No, I'm just kidding. I'm not going to do that. You were either really nervous and uncomfortable or really weirdly attentive just then.

I think it helps to start off by understanding exactly what it is we're talking about when we talk about lust. Because, honestly, if someone asked you what it *is*, what would you *say*? How do you *define* lust? (This sermon is also going to set the record for the most times I have ever said *lust* in my life.) The dictionary defines *lust* as "pleasure; delight; an intense longing; to have an intense desire or need." But is that a sin? Are *pleasure* and *delight* sins? Is it a sin to have an intense longing or need?

There are a lot of different things that we associate with lust. We've heard the expressions, "lust for power," "lust for money." But when this list of Seven Deadly Sins first originated, it was associated purely with sexual desire. Lust was understood as intense sexual desire. But is *that* a sin? Isn't it a *good* thing for two people who are married to experience intense sexual desire for one another? So then we say, "Well, lust is intense sexual desire for someone to whom you are not married or have not committed your life." One author defines lust as intense sexual desire that leads to adultery, but as we'll see in just a minute, Jesus throws a wrench into *that* understanding.

I think you could make a case for understanding *lust* as "intense desire that *objectifies*." When you view someone, something as an object that only exists for your pleasure and fulfillment; as a means to an end, something for you to act upon to get what you want or need. That applies to a lust for *power* (doing anything you have to do to get power, no matter who it affects), a lust for *money* (viewing other people as simply a means for you to get more money), and it applies to *sex* (viewing this other person, whether you know them or not, as a means to the satisfaction of your desire; not as a *child of God* created in the *image of God*, but as an *object*, a *thing* that simply exists for you to act upon, to give you what you want). It removes the personal, human element from the relationship, and it removes *love*.

The 14<sup>th</sup> century poet Dante, who popularized the Seven Deadly Sins in his epic poem *Inferno*, describes lust as "excessive love of others," that renders your love for God secondary. He called it *disordered love*; that our love for others (for our spouses, friends, family, whoever) is supposed to flow from our love for God – we love because we *are* loved and we recognize the image of God, the one who loves us, in this other person – but lust places our desire for others *above* our love for God. As we'll state in our Affirmation of Faith in just a little bit, Jesus says that we are

to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. But when we experience lust, we are not loving God with all our heart and soul and mind, and we are not loving our neighbor as we want to be loved.

You know, the funny thing is, throughout the centuries, lust has typically been viewed as the *least* serious of the Seven Deadly Sins. Pride was at the top of the list, but lust was at the bottom, because lust was thought of as a *physical* sin, as opposed to a *spiritual* sin like pride, envy, and anger, which were thought to be much more serious. But we live now in such a *highly* sexualized culture in which we are constantly bombarded by the temptation to objectify other people into nothing more than sexual beings. Television, movies, the Internet, magazines – and I’m not just talking about the *adult* variety. It’s everything from cartoons to *Cosmo*, *Teen Vogue* to *Sports Illustrated*. Lust has become a much more serious problem over the past 20-30 years, especially with all this mass media we have. Because sex sells, right?

Jesus was ahead of his time in saying that lust is not just a *physical* sin but a *spiritual* one. He says, “You’ve heard the commandment, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at another person with lust has *already* committed adultery in their heart.” It is not just about the physical act. It is a condition of the heart that draws us away from God and from each other.

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King David was walking around on his roof one day (as you do), when he saw a very beautiful woman taking a bath. Setting aside the fact that the greatest king in the history of Israel was a peeping tom, what we see here is not love at first sight, but David being so overcome with lust that he used his power as king to force this woman to enter into a relationship with him. He

places his lust for Bathsheba, his desire in that moment, above anything else. Above his relationship with God. His lust leads to all these other decisions that serve to draw him away from God and from other people. It's like last week when we saw how envy is like a door that, once you open it, all these other problems come in. God said to Cain before he killed his brother Abel, "Sin is lurking at the door, but you must master it." David opens this door, because he can't see anything beyond the desire and pleasure of this present moment, and when he does, *everything goes wrong*. Bathsheba becomes pregnant, David has her husband Uriah killed, and their child dies.

In David we see the sin of lust. But it's important to look at Uriah's role in this story, because in *him* we see the virtue of chastity. When David finds out that Bathsheba is pregnant, he sends for her husband Uriah. No one else knows that Bathsheba is pregnant yet, so David thinks, "I'll bring her soldier husband home from war. He will go home to her, lie with her, and think that the baby is *his*." So David tells Uriah, "You've earned a break! Go home and see your wife!" But he didn't. He slept at the entrance to the king's house. And when David says, "Why didn't you go home like I told you to," Uriah says, "The ark of God is in a tent, and my fellow soldiers are still in the field. Should I then go home to my wife?" David even tries to get him *drunk*, but *that* doesn't work. Uriah places his love for God, his devotion to God above his passion for his wife. *That* is chastity.

We usually think of chastity as refraining from any sexual activity. But we're not talking about *celibacy*. The word chastity comes from the Latin word *castus*, which means "pure." For something to be *pure* means that it is undefiled, unadulterated, uncontaminated. Think of a glass of water. For a glass of water to be *pure*, it can't have anything else in it – no dirt or additives or pollutants. It is of one single substance. If you look at the way that the words *pure* and *purity*

have been used throughout Judaism and Christianity, they have these connotations of *being singly focused*; on the *one thing*; your heart and mind are of *one substance*; you are not *divided* in your devotion or your love. So purity and chastity are about your heart and mind and life being focused on the *one thing*.

By that understanding, you can have *chastity* within the framework of a *marriage*. Because again, we're not talking about *celibacy* here, we're talking about the fidelity, the faithfulness in your love, that the two of you are not looking anywhere, at anyone else. You are focused on the *one thing*. We practice chastity and purity in our relationship with God when we are singly-focused on who God wants us to be and what God wants us to do. We're not letting our passions draw us away from that, and everything else (including our relationships) flows from that.

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This is what Jesus was talking about when he says, "If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one of your members than to enter hell whole." He is not calling us to harm ourselves in order to resist temptation. Christians have taken it there over the centuries, but that is not what God wants for us. Christ is saying, "If something is getting in the way of your ability to be singly-focused on loving God and loving your neighbor, then you need to rid your life of that thing. If something is dividing your devotion and your love, then you need to remove that barrier."

He goes on to say, "The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eye is *healthy*, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is *unhealthy*, your whole body will be full of darkness." Jesus is calling us to be mindful of what we set our eyes on; of *who* we set our eyes on. Don't set your eye on something or someone that you know is dividing your devotion and love from

where it should be focused, whether that's on *God*, your *spouse*, whatever that *one thing* is. Because when we set our *eye* on that, it's not long before we set our *heart* on that.

God gave us passion and love and sexuality as a *gift*. Not as something to be shunned and shamed and avoided and feared. But like every other gift that God gives, we are called to be good stewards of it. Not to let it consume our lives and dictate our thoughts and actions, but to use it responsibly, as an expression of our faith and our love for God and our resulting love for each other. We do that when we set our eyes, not on the gift itself, but on the one who *gives* it. God is the source of all love, and so our love for each other should be a reflection of God's love for us.