

Battling the Unbelief of Lust

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A Biblical Definition of Lust

Let's begin with a biblical definition of lust. Lust is a sexual desire that dishonors its object and disregards God. Let me show you where I get that definition from today's text.

Comparing the Translations

Verse 4 in the RSV addresses the men at Thessalonica and 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.

But the NIV says,

that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God.

The NASB says,

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.

I think the RSV captures the meaning most clearly.

[Reasons: 1) the parallel in 1 Corinthians 7:2; 2) the meaning of *ktasthai* is overwhelmingly "take" or "acquire" not "control" or "possess"; 3) "vessel" in connection to "honor" in 1 Peter 3:7 refers to wife; 4) *heautou*—"his own"—seems to be emphatic and would fit fiancé or wife better than body; 5) the NIV and NASB don't make sense, because they say in effect, "learn to control your body . . . not in passionate lust." You can take a woman in passionate lust, but you cannot control your body in passionate lust.] But instead of going into detailed arguments for that, I think I can show you the meaning of lust here in all of these translations.

The Opposite of Holiness and Honor

Notice that verses 4 and 5 say 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." Do you see 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 the definition of 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 or regulated or guided by two concerns: honor toward the other person and holiness toward God. Lust is what that sexual desire becomes when that honor and that holiness are missing from it.

Lust Dishonors Its Object

Take honor, for instance. God established a relationship called marriage. In it a man and a woman make a life-long 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, I want you to satisfy my sexual desire, but I do not want you as a covenant partner in marriage basically means: I want to use your body for my pleasure, but as a whole person I don't want you. And 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, take a wife (or control your body/vessel) "in holiness . . . not in the passion of lust." Holiness has to do with God—being set apart for God. So verse 5 goes on like this: "Not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God."

Knowing God and acting like it keeps sexual desire from becoming lust. Look at verse 8: "Therefore whoever disregards this [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 which is not regulated or governed or guided by a supreme regard for God.

God created sexuality. He created it good and beautiful. He created it for the good of his creatures. He alone has the wisdom and the right to show us how to use it for his glory and our good. Lust is what that sexual desire becomes when we give it rein in disregard for God.

In summary then, lust is a sexual desire that dishonors its object and disregards God. It's 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.

Pondering the Danger of Lust

That's the definition. Now the next issue is SO WHAT? Why is this 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 the big issues like nuclear arms and social justice? You've known people like that, I suppose. They say, Sexual attitudes and sexual behavior are a matter of relatively insignificant personal piety. What counts is whether you boycott companies in South Africa and oppose Star Wars defense systems. Sleeping around is simply no big deal if you are on the picket line at Honeywell; and flipping through *Playboy* is utterly insignificant if you are on your way to peace talks in Geneva.

That is the way the religious 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 says, "that no man transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we solemnly forewarned you."

This means that the consequences of lust are going to be worse than the consequences of nuclear war. All that nuclear war can do is kill the 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. And according to 1 Thessalonians 4:6 God's vengeance is coming upon those who disregard the warning against lust.

Lust and Eternal Security

This past September I spoke to the student body of Wheaton Christian High School. I took as my topic, "Ten Lessons for Fighting Lust." Lesson number 6 was, "Ponder the eternal danger of lust."

My text on that point was Matthew 5:28–29 where Jesus says, "Every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; 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 the thoughts of 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 ago when I confronted a man about the adultery he was presently living in. I tried to understand his situation and I pled with him to return to his wife. Then I said, "You know Jesus says that 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, and said, "You mean you think a person can lose his salvation?"

So 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, and that nullifies the warnings of the Bible and puts the sinning person who claims to be a Christian beyond the reach of biblical threats. And this doctrine is comforting thousands on the way to hell.

Jesus said, if you don't fight lust, you won't go to heaven.

The stakes are much higher than whether the world is blown up by a thousand bombs. If you don't fight lust, you won't go to heaven (1 Peter 2:11; Colossians 3:6; Galatians 5:21; 1 Corinthians 6:10; Hebrews 12:14).

Justifying Faith Is Lust-Fighting Faith

Are we not, then, saved by faith—by believing in Jesus Christ? We are indeed! Those who persevere in faith shall be saved (Matthew 24:13; 10:22; 1 Corinthians 15:3; Colossians 1:23; 2 Thessalonians 2:13). 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."

That leads us to our main concern this morning—to show that the fight against lust is a battle against unbelief. And the fight for sexual purity is the fight of faith.

The Great Error That Must Be Exploded

The great error that I am trying to explode in these messages is the error that says, faith in God is one thing and the fight for holiness is another thing. Faith gets you to heaven and holiness gets you rewards. You get your justification by faith, and you get your sanctification by works. You start the Christian life in the power of the Spirit, you press on in the efforts of the flesh. This is the great evangelical error of our day. The battle for obedience is optional, they say, because only faith is necessary for salvation.

Our response: the battle for obedience is absolutely necessary for salvation because it IS 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 delivers from lust.

A Greater Gospel

I hope you can see that this is a greater gospel than the other one. 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. This is God's demand and this is God's gift. It is all of grace. That's why the only fight we fight is the fight of faith—the fight to rest so fully in the grace of God—to be so satisfied with the glory of God—that temptation to sin loses its power over us.

The battle against lust is the battle against unbelief. The crucial verses here are verses 5 and 8. We only have time to look at verse 5.

The Knowledge of God

In verse 5 Paul says, ". . . not in the passion of lust like heathen [i.e., 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 your body) not in the passion of lust because that is what people do who don't 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!" In other words, Satan and his hosts have some very accurate knowledge of God and Jesus, but that is not the kind of knowledge Paul has in mind here.

The knowledge he has in mind here is knowledge of God described in 2 Corinthians 4:6—"the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (see Galatians 4:8; 1 Corinthians 2:14; 2 Peter 1:3–4). It's the knowledge 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 that you don't have when you say ho-hum during the Hallelujah Chorus or grumble on the rim of the Grand Canyon. Hearing they do not hear and seeing they do not see. It's not that kind of knowledge. It comes like it did for Lydia when the Lord opened the eyes of her heart. At one moment you think you will burst with its fullness, and suddenly there is a chasm of longing for more. It's the knowledge we call faith—the assurance of things hoped for the conviction of things not seen.

It's a knowledge that is 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 in *Leadership* (Fall 1982). It 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, *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 gave in the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." 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. (pp. 43–44)

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.

Do you know God this morning? Are you growing week by week in the knowledge of God's greatness? Do you meditate on his Word day and night? Do you ponder the pictures of his Son in the gospels? Do you read solid books about his character and his ways? Do you look at everything in your day as his creation? Do you pray for a sensitive heart that can be ravished by the revelation of his glory?

I call you to make those commitments now for the sake of your own soul and for the glory of God.