

Learning to Live Without Lust

August 7, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

Matthew 5:27-30

²⁷ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' ²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

Today's topic is one that I even hesitated to bring up. Sex, and lust in particular, are topics that some might say are not appropriate for church. But let's be clear about something up front. Jesus talked about it in his Sermon on the Mount. And there was a reason he talked about it. People had problems in defining sexual boundaries just as much in Jesus' day as we do in our day. It's just that today we are much more public about it. It's hard to watch a movie, read a book, watch a television program, surf the internet, watch an advertisement, or even check out at the grocery store without seeing more of other people's bodies than we really need to see. According to one estimate, over fourteen thousand sexual references are made on TV per year; the average person will view over one hundred thousand of those references in his or her lifetime.¹

There are two false narratives about sexual desire. (1) Assuming all sexual desire is evil; and (2) believing that all sexual desire is good. The first one, assuming that all sexual desire is evil, has its roots in the church through many years of pretty much a "don't ask; don't tell; don't even bring the subject up" kind of policy. Yet there are those sitting in church who have having affairs, struggling with pornography, and wrestling with unhealthy sexual desires. On the other extreme you have those believe that all sexual desire is good. Most movies and television shows have treated sexual desires so casually that a majority of people believe that it anything goes when it comes to sex as long as it's consensual. Attitudes and behaviors that once shocked us barely register a response any longer. Taking such liberties with something that was intended to be sacred has led to all kinds of brokenness and strife.

First, we need to be assured that sexual desire was something that was created by God and was intended as good. When God created Adam and Eve, his command to them was to "be fruitful

¹ Smith, James Bryan. The Good and Beautiful Life: Putting on the Character of Christ (The Apprentice Series Book 2) . InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

and multiply.” God created our bodies in his image, and we were not intended to be ashamed of our bodies.

Jesus’ words about sexual desire/lust in the Sermon on the Mount are often misunderstood. It was primarily directed to men, because the society at that time was patriarchal, and women were treated as second-class citizens at best. Adultery was tolerated among the men but was punishable by death for a woman. In his sermon Jesus makes it clear that everyone has to accept responsibility for their sin.

This passage has led many to believe Jesus is saying that simply looking at a woman lustfully is the same as committing adultery. It certainly appears that way. But a closer look reveals something different. Explain how a lustful person has the same inner condition as an adulterer? The word that is used for lust in this passage is *epithumia*. This word had a very specific meaning. It does not refer to ordinary sexual attraction but to intentionally objectifying another person for one’s own gratification. ...*Epithumia* is not referring to the first look but to the second. The first look may be simple attraction, but the second look is leering. Lust does not value the person but mere body parts. *Epithumia* goes beyond mere sexual attraction. It intentionally cultivates sexual desire for the sake of the feeling itself. It is the opposite of love. Love looks into the eyes; *epithumia* steals glances below them. Love values the other as a person; *epithumia* degrades the other. We must make a clear distinction between attraction and objectification, between feeling sexual desire and *epithumia*. When we fail to make the distinction, we adopt the first false narrative and think that sexual attraction is evil in itself.²

When you lust after someone, you are treating them like an object. You devalue them as a person. Men, when you look at a woman lustfully, think of how you would feel if someone did the same to your mother, wife, daughter, or sister. Would it make you angry that someone is treating your loved one simply like an object to be manipulated? Yet, when you lust after someone, you are treating someone’s daughter, and possibly mother, sister, or spouse that way.

Women, don’t think you get off so easy. Men tend to view their pornography. Women tend to read their pornography. Romance novels tend to sell so well because they have juicy, steamy parts to them that are more verbally explicit about lust than some visuals that men prefer. We can all find ourselves subject to the temptation of lust, especially in today’s society that tends to worship sex and revel in explicit details.

Living in the kingdom, and thereby changing our false narratives to kingdom narratives, is the solution to overcoming *epithumia*. Too many people repeatedly try—and fail—to deal with lust through their willpower and tearful prayers but find no genuine change. We cannot change our heart by changing outer behavior alone. This is why Jesus spoke about plucking out our eye when it offends us.

² Ibid.

Jesus was not speaking literally but was using a rhetorical device called *reductio ad absurdum*, meaning to reduce the argument to its logical absurdity. He was attacking the commonly held notion that sin resides in the offending part of the body. This is why some cultures cut off the hand of a thief. They reason: cut off the sinful part, and the sin will be gone. "If your right eye causes you to sin," Jesus says, "tear it out."

As Dallas Willard often jokes, "Jesus is not here advocating that we cut off every offending part so we can roll into heaven as a bloody stump!" He is taking their logic to that absurd conclusion. The problem is not in our hand or our eye—the lust is in our heart. To be sure, our body is involved in the act, but the real culprit is inward, in the imagination, in the heart. I lust—or cultivate lust (*epithumia*)—when I feel empty and have nowhere to put my strong desires. When I am not in close union with God and his kingdom, I have a void in my soul. I want to feel something, to be caught up in something, and when I am disconnected from God and his kingdom, one of the most thrilling alternatives is *epithumia*.³

Richard Foster uses a triangle diagram to help people see the connection between commitment and intimacy.

Imagine a triangle with one angle at the top. The two sides rising from the base represent two aspects of a relationship: one, the level of commitment, and the other, the level of physical intimacy. The base of the triangle represents a relationship with no physical intimacy and no commitment. As the level of commitment rises, so can the level of physical intimacy. The point of the diagram is to illustrate that physical intimacy must be matched by an appropriate level of commitment. On a first or second date, for example, there is very little commitment, so kissing is not appropriate. But as the commitment level rises, the level of intimacy can rise as well because each person has been properly valued.⁴

This way one does not diminish the value of another person by becoming too intimate before the level of commitment has been raised. When you give yourself intimately to someone that you are not committed to, you have not only compromised your value, you have given away a part of your sacred worth.

Kingdom living like this all takes time. As James Bryan Smith puts it:

To put it simply: We must really want to change. I know this sounds simplistic and even harsh to those who fail. "But I do want to change! How dare you say I don't!" When I have probed deeply into the person's heart, I have discovered that they do not really want to change; they merely dislike the consequences of the failure (the guilt, the embarrassment, the shame). In order to find freedom from lust a person must really be sick of it and understand its nature. Many have said they wanted to change, but in reality they nurse a love of lust. Promises, pledges and resolutions are no match for a heart that secretly cherishes sin and merely dislikes its consequences. Those who have overcome *epithumia*

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

have exposed it for what it is: a false and short-lived feeling of pleasure that ultimately harms life. We can begin to change only when we see epithumia for what it is. Then we need to cultivate something else in its place: a strong sense of our worth, love and appreciation for life in the kingdom, and healthy relationships that bring us the intimacy we long for. Then we find freedom. If you struggle with this, be encouraged. Countless people have overcome it. Begin by praying for the desire to change. Ask God to instill wisdom to see epithumia for what it is. Pray for a strong desire for purity. This powerful prayer is often the first step toward real and lasting change.⁵

⁵ Ibid.