

“7-Lust”

Today we’re continuing the series we started last week called 7. We’re looking at what’s been called the seven deadly sins. **The Seven Deadly Sins: Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Sloth, Wrath, Envy, Pride.** This was a list created in the 4th century of the sins that are the source of all the others sins. And last week we talked about how the word for sin in the Bible is the Greek word Hamartia. It means to take the wrong path. A path that doesn’t lead to the destination you really want. It’s also an archery term that means to miss the mark.

In fact, there was once a famous Russian archer. He had spent his life become the very best. He had traveled the world competing and learning from the great archery masters and as he learned and applied what he learned he had become the very best. One day as he was traveling in the Russian countryside he came upon the outskirts of a small village, and there at the outskirts was a large red barn. And there on the side of the barn were dozens of targets painted in white—dozens of them. And in the dead-center bulls eye of every single target was an arrow.

The archer saw this and said, “The person who did this is truly a master. The one who did this is better than I and I must learn from him or her.” So the archer sent his people into the village to find out who had shot these arrows and eventually they found out. It was actually a little boy. They were all shocked and so was the archer when they brought the boy to him.

The archer looked at the boy and said, “You’re the one who shot these arrows?” “Yes, I’m the one.” “Then you must tell me how you do it so that I can learn. I thought I was the best, but you are greater than me. Teach me.”

The boy said, “I have a very specific technique. I practice it every day. I stand back from the barn a hundred yards. I carefully place the arrow on the string of my bow. Then I slowly draw back the arrow as I concentrate on the barn. Then I let the arrow fly. And when it hits the barn...I go paint the target around it.”

When it comes to what God desires for our lives, he creates the target and we do our best to hit the bulls eye. God tells us, teaches us, what life should look like, he gives us our goals and how to live this one-and-only life. Part of what we struggle with is we think we get to just paint the target wherever we happen to be aiming. We think we define what sin is, we think we define what success is, and all that leads to is pain for us and for others.

Jesus told us that he came to give us life and give it to us in the full. Sin keeps us from living that life. This isn’t about making you or me feeling bad, it’s about us living lives to the full. It’s about us avoiding the traps, especially the deadly ones.

And today we’re going to focus on **Lust. What is it? How does it affect us and what can we do about it?** We also want to look at its opposite. What’s the virtue that we can cultivate to keep lust in its place?

First, let’s talk about sexual desire. In the book of Genesis in the Bible, God creates man and woman and they cling to one another and they become one flesh. That’s a euphemism for sexual intimacy. God invented it. It was a good thing. You get to the Song of Solomon in the Old Testament and you find an extended poem where the beauty of erotic love is described right there in the middle of your Bible! Sex is clearly meant to be a good gift from God. And before the days of birth control people understood sexual intimacy to be a way to join with God in the act of creation. It was holy and sacred.

The problem starts when sexual desire is removed from its moorings. It’s a problem when morality is separated from sexual desire. It’s a problem when the will of God is separated from sexual desire. It’s a problem when covenantal love is separated from sexual desire.

But sexual desire within that covenantal love, within marriage, is a beautiful thing. Within that covenant where two people have made promises to each other saying, “It doesn’t matter how wrinkled you get or what happens to your body, or how poor you are, or what happens when you’re sick, I’m still going to love you. I’ll be by your side forever. I make a covenant to be with you.”

In that context you give yourself completely to another human being. There’s something beautiful and sacred and spiritual about that. In that context sexual intimacy is meant to give you feelings of safety and security and it’s meant for you to create a bond with each other. Sex is God’s good gift. Like I said last week, it’s not like God’s looking down on us saying, “Look at what they’re doing down there. What will they think of next?!”

God invented sex. In fact, God designed our bodies so that in the midst of sexual intimacy certain hormones are released and wash across our brains. One of those hormones is called oxytocin. It's been called the love and cuddle hormone. It's the hormone that's released when a woman is nursing her child that causes her to bond with the child. It's the hormone that released in men and women during sexual intimacy and causes them to bond with one another. It's God way of connecting the man and woman, of bonding them with one another.

But problems happen when you take this gift from God, sexual intimacy, and you decide that it's primarily for your instant gratification. You have sexual intimacy with somebody, it's a one night stand, and then with someone else, and then someone else. Several things happen here. For the other person there is at least a chance that they actually started to bond with you because they gave themselves completely to you, and you gave yourself to them. But you didn't really mean anything by it. There's so much pain out there because of that. Another thing that happens is that you can lose the ability to bond because oxytocin no longer works in you the way it was supposed to work in you because your brain and body figure out that the presence of oxytocin doesn't mean bonding. You become incapable of bonding.

I don't know how many people have come to me and told me their stories of sexual promiscuity. One partner after another, after another, trying to find love, and feeling so burned out, incapable of loving anybody. The misuse of the gift doesn't lead to fulfillment, it leads to emptiness. It trivializes sex.

When we trivialize sex it just becomes a way to gratify our needs without any concern for anything else. It's sort of like having poison ivy. You ever had poison ivy? It starts to itch, and you start to scratch. What happens when you scratch your poison ivy? Doesn't it just make you crazy and have to scratch it some more? And you keep scratching, and keep scratching, and the more you scratch the more it itches and the harder you scratch, until you start taking the hide off and leaving scars on your body—permanent damage! What you're really meant to do, is leave it alone. When you think of sex as just a way to gratify your desire without any other concern, that's what it's like—permanent damage.

I've heard so many stories from friends of mine, and from people wanting help, who gave into lust. And hey, all of us wrestle with this at certain points in our lives, but when we actually give into it, it's so destructive. Adam Hamilton tells about a friend of his in seminary. He was a really good guy. He loved Jesus and wanted to be a pastor and lead people to Christ.

He was living in an apartment and one day he was taking the trash out to the dumpster and when he dumped in his trash he looked down and noticed some pornographic magazines in there. He instantly felt this draw to them, this desire to see more than just the cover. He was tempted to reach in and grab them, but he talked himself out of it. "It's not right. I'm going to be a pastor. I don't need that in my life." He walked away and got about 30 yards away and something just pulled him back—or maybe he just pulled himself back. He went back and fished the magazines out of the dumpster and took them back to his apartment. He looked through them, and after gratifying himself, he felt guilty and ashamed and threw them away. But the next day after he got off from school, he thought, "I wonder if those magazines are still there in the dumpster." Late that night when nobody else was around he started rummaging through a day's worth of old garbage in that dumpster to find the magazines he'd thrown away the day before and pulls them back out.

He later said, "This became a pattern in my life. Every time I'd take out the trash I'd wonder if there were more of those magazines in that dumpster." He said, "I finally reached bottom when I found myself at night crawling around in the filth of that dumpster sifting all the way to the bottom to see if I could find one magazine."

What happened to that young man? The itching and the scratching. He became a slave. That's what lust does to us. It takes the natural good gifts of God and makes us a slave.

There's the teenager who had made a commitment to Christ and to herself that she would wait until marriage to have sex. But things didn't work out that way. She'd heard in health class about how, when you sleep with somebody you sleep with everybody else they've ever slept with, and all the precautions you should take. None of that really applied to her, until she discovered she had a sexually transmitted disease that might affect her ability to have kids someday. Trying to figure out, with tears in her eyes, "How can I take this back? How am I going to tell my mom and dad? What does this mean for my future?"

For her it wasn't an addiction. It wasn't the poison ivy. It was simply the consequences of doing something that wasn't in line with God's will for her life.

Then there's the man who started flirting a bit at the office with a coworker. Flirtation turned into long conversations. Lying to his wife as to why he was coming home late. Those long conversations turned into sharing feelings which became a touch, which turned into an embrace, which led to a sexual affair. When his wife found out and he admitted to it, it literally knocked her to the floor sobbing in the fetal position. He stood there realizing how he had hurt this woman that he truly loved and he realized what he had done to her and himself.

In this case there was healing that happened. That was many years ago and they have a good marriage today. But there is scar there for her and for him. This is what lust does to us. It's powerful and it can be deadly. As your pastor I don't want that for you. I don't want that for me.

Lust, like all temptation, starts in the thoughts. It doesn't start with an action, it starts with the thoughts. This is why Jesus said, **"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 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. 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" (Matthew 5:27-30).**

Jesus is not literally telling us to gouge out our eyes or cut off our hands. What he's saying is that this is really serious business, please understand how dangerous this can be to you and other people. So don't step off the path. He's also telling that that path starts here in our minds, long before we actually physically do anything. It starts in our thoughts. It's the thought life we have to train first.

Walter Wangerin is a pastor and author, he wrote a book called *As For Me And My House*, and in the book he tells about a time when he found himself attracted to a member of his church. His wife, whom he loved deeply, was his wife. At church he was super-pastor, respected, revered, relied upon, looked up to. But at home he was just Walter, an ordinary guy, the guy who took out the trash and unclogged the toilets.

There was a woman who was attracted to him. Whenever she would see him she would tell him, "You're such a wonderful pastor, such a great preacher, so kind." It made him feel special. He writes how he found himself facing these feelings. He was tempted. He realized pretty quickly what was going on, got his head on straight and avoided the temptation, but he said what he realized was that the danger came in the moment of the maybe. It was in not saying "no" instantly, but instead saying, "I'm not going to do anything, but I wonder what it would be like if I did." The moment of maybe. And playing with those thoughts in his head. He said, "The longer I played with it in my head, the more likely it was that I was actually going to act on it and I had to stop the thoughts." If Walter Wangerin would have pursued that woman the consequences would have been the loss of his wife, his dignity, his ministry.

I've spoken with people who have been tempted to be unfaithful with somebody at work, or with a neighbor. My advice in those situations if that person is at work, ask to be transferred to another department, or even another location. It might be necessary to take a pay cut, to find a completely different company. If it's a neighbor, you might have to move to another part of town, or another town all together. You may have to take a pay cut or move out of a home you love, but how much is it worth to you? Are you willing to lose your husband, your wife, your family, your dignity, your soul over it? Sell the house! Find another job! This is what Jesus meant when he said gouge out your eye, or cut off your hand if it's causing you to sin. It's deadly, take drastic measures before it takes you down.

Through the centuries, the church found that it was important not just to name the deadly sins so you could see where you might get off the path. But they also wanted to paint a picture of God's will--the target we're meant to go after. Scripture says this: **"It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is**

holy and honorable...and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.” (1Thessalonians 4:3-8).

There are several key things in here. It says there that we should learn to control our bodies. Self control is one of the virtues God would have us target in our lives. In our culture you can't help being exposed to erotic images that stir up lust. But what we can do is practice self-control and choose not to go back for a second look. It's about deciding in advance what you will and won't do, because if you haven't decided before the temptation hits, you're already toast. Practice self-control.

Paul, in this passage, also tells us that we should not wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. God may be disappointed when we hurt ourselves, but when we hurt somebody else by the misuse of the gift of sexuality, that's when the wrath of God begins to be revealed. When you treat people as objects and hurt them in the process the wrath of God is revealed.

And Paul tells us to pursue holiness. That looks like daily saying to God, “Lord, help me to become more like you today. To live for you and honor you with my thought life, and my actions, and my words.” This means to have self-control and say ‘No’ to things when we face temptations. Not ‘maybe’ but ‘No.’ To control our bodies, to not exploit others, to strive to be pure in our hearts, in what we think about our sisters and brothers.

When faced with temptation, the temptation of lust, remember the 5 r's. First, **Remember who you are.** You are a child of God, you belong to Jesus Christ. You've made a commitment to him. Remember that. And when it comes to lust, especially, remember your other relationships. Maybe you are a spouse. Remember who you are.

Second, **Realize the consequences of your actions.** One man came to me years ago broken. He had given in to lust and had an affair and he was grieving because his grown children rarely called, rarely came by. I asked him if he thought about how his affair might affect them and his relationship with them. He simply said, “No.” Realize the consequences.

Third **Remove yourself from the situation.** This one's particularly important when it comes to lust. If it's porn on the internet, block it. Go to xxxchurch.com and download free accountability software. If it's a person, cut the ties completely. Remove yourself.

Fourth, **Rededicate yourself to God in prayer.** When you pray in the middle of temptation, it's hard for lust to stick around. Stop and rededicate yourself in prayer.

Last, **Reveal your struggle to a trusted friend.** Part of the power of sin comes from its secrecy. Your tendency is to withdraw from others when you know you're giving in or about to give in to temptation, but that's very time to tell that trusted friend.

I want to end with this word of grace. If you've already given in to lust, know that you can be restored. King David slept with another man's wife and later had him killed, he knew he had done terrible, terrible things and he came to a place where he was utterly broken and the consequences were excruciating for him. In his brokenness he wrote Psalm 51. **“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation...” (Psalm 51:10-12).** And God did. Even there, God forgave David and gave him a new start. Yes there were consequences for his actions he couldn't avoid. But God did restore the joy of his salvation. And if God can do that with David, God can do that with you.

So, is lust deadly? You bet it is. Deadly to your relationships, your career, your soul. But with God's help we can practice self control and live, really live. That's God's desire. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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