

“THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS”

LUST

This morning in our series on the seven deadly sins we come to sin number five – the sin of lust. Lust is perhaps the most hidden, secretive of the seven sins and the most uncomfortable to talk about, but as with all of the seven deadly sins, to conquer it we must bring it out in to the light and understand how it operates in our lives.

When I was going to seminary, I spent a summer working as a youth ministry intern in Minnesota. I stayed with two different families over the summer, and the first family I stayed with were longtime, well-respected members of the church. I stayed in the room of their college-age son who was away for the summer, and one night as I turned off the light and crawled into bed, I heard a faint little buzzing sound. I tried to ignore it, but I kept hearing it, and so I turned the light back on and walked around the room, but couldn't find anything so I went back to bed. A few minutes later I heard the same little buzz and got up again. It sounded like it might be coming from underneath the bed, so I looked and didn't see anything.

Then, for no particular reason, I lifted the mattress up and did a double-take. Under the mattress were dozens of magazines, and they weren't *Good Housekeeping*. They were Playboy magazines. Oh my goodness, I thought – that's what this buzzing noise was all about – to lead me to these magazines – call it demonic – but after that, I never heard the buzz again.

I began to find these magazines all over the house – almost as though there was no attempt to hide them – and I wish I could say I didn't succumb to temptation – I did – but I also fought it and was very glad a short time later when I moved in with another family. It shook me to think that if this church-going, outwardly godly family allowed lust to walk through the door or their home, how many other Christian homes are the same? I could spend several minutes giving you statistics about how wide-spread pornography is, but I probably don't have to convince you that it is epidemic, and in the age of the internet, the opportunity to feed the sin of lust is just a click away.

The goal in this series is to bring out into the open the sins of the heart – the sins that no one can see but that snare us and keep us from walking with freedom and power. We want to put these sins under the microscope so that we understand the power they possess, and then see from God's Word how we can have victory over them. This morning we want to look at three things: what lust is, what it does to us, and what we can do to conquer it.

The biblical word for lust means a strong craving or desire that controls and consumes you. Desires are not wrong, but are a big part of what makes us human. Desire is what makes us get out of bed in the morning – it's what provides and drive and passion to get things done and be productive. God has placed within us a number of desires – the desire for food, the desire for water, the desire for sleep, the desire meaning, and the desire for sex. All of these desires are good, natural desires but become distorted when they go beyond their God-ordained boundaries and limitations. There are a number of things we can lust after – we can lust for power, for money, for some object or material – but in the Bible lust refers most often to sexual desires.

I was very thankful to have a youth pastor who taught us teen guys that sexual desires were not sinful in themselves – which was a relief to all of us. The first thing God told Adam and Eve was to be fruitful and multiply. The Bible presents sex as a wonderful gift from God when expressed rightly in the covenant of marriage. When expressed outside of marriage it is destructive and debilitating, and many of the problems we face in our culture are the direct result of disregarding God's sexual boundaries.

If sexual desires are normal, when do these desires become lust? In the Sermon on the Mount 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” (Matthew 5:27-28). The Greek word for “look” refers not to a glance, but a prolonged, continuous look. As you’re going about your day, there are going to be people that catch your eye and that you find attractive. Joseph, it says in Genesis 39, caught the eye of Potiphar’s wife – she saw that he was well-built and handsome. There’s nothing wrong with noticing and admiring someone’s beauty, and saying, “How marvelous are thy works O Lord.”

The kind of looking Jesus talks about in this verse is a long, extended look – where you look and keep looking and you begin to fanaticize about them. Jesus said that if you look at a woman lustfully you’ve committed adultery with her in your heart. And if lust lingers in the heart, James says, it gives birth to outward sin.

One evening King David, the man after God’s own heart, is out on his balcony and off in the distance he sees a woman bathing, and she is beautiful. He says, “How marvelous are thy works O Lord.” But instead of turning away, he continues looking, and the longer he looks the more lust forms in his heart. Then he acts. He says to his servant, “Go find out about her.” Ut-oh. We know where this is going, but David’s not thinking straight. He finds out that she’s married, at which point David should have said, “I’m a married man, she’s a married woman – I can’t have her.” But David tells his servant to go get her, and he sleeps with her. And we’ll talk more about David in a moment.

Lust is closely connected to coveting in that in that you have an intense desire for something that is not yours. The tenth commandment says, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” God says, “Keep your desires within their proper limits. Desire your wife, but don’t desire your neighbor’s wife. Don’t lust or covet after what it not yours.”

In Jesus’ day, everyone recognized that adultery was wrong, but Jesus said, “If you look at a woman lustfully, you’ve already committed adultery with her in your heart.” “What does it matter,” some will ask, “What happens in the privacy of my mind? It doesn’t hurt anybody, and if I don’t act on my fantasies and thoughts, what harm is there in that?”

This was the thinking of the Pharisees, who went to great lengths to look pure and holy in public, but inside they were full of pride and envy and anger and greed and lust. “But as long as we look good on the outside, we’re okay.” But Jesus said, “Not so.”

In Mark 7:20-23 He tells them, “What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.” God looks at the heart because the heart is the wellspring of life – and when the heart is pure, everything that flows out of our life will be pure.

Lust is one of the most powerful and destructive sins in our culture today, and everyone – either directly or indirectly – reaps the fallout of this deadly sin in three ways. Number one, **it distorts the true meaning of love.** God created us as relational beings – to love and to be loved – and He designed that our sexual desires to be fulfilled in the covenant of marriage – because He knows that true sexual fulfillment can only take place in the context of love. Love, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, is unselfish – it looks to give, not take. Lust is a purely selfish act that looks to take, not give.

Lust deceives you into thinking it satisfies your desires, but it only leads to even more emptiness. John Mayer, an award-winning musician, spoke candidly in an interview a few years back about how he would wake up each morning and before getting out of bed would view dozens of pornographic images, looking for the ultimate picture, and once he'd found it, he kept looking. Mayer admitted that pornography is an addiction that never stops, and the more you look at it, the less fulfilled you are. Worse yet, Mayer said, is that it changes the way you look at women in that they become like objects than human beings.

In recent years research has shown how viewing pornography changes the way the brain is wired, so that the brain becomes hard-wired to be sexually attracted to an image instead of rather than a human being. The more times these images are viewed, the more a person loses their ability to be attracted to a real person.

Research also shows the devastating toll pornography has taken on marriage. When someone starts looking at pornography, especially at a young age, it fixes in their minds an unreal view of sex, and an expectation that their spouse or future spouse can never live up to. Few people in the world look like the air brushed images found in magazines or videos. It's easy to see hurt and problems in marriage, and God knows that. He created us. He knows that lust distorts the meaning of love, and it short-circuits the intimacy He's designed to be enjoyed within marriage.

Solomon talks very candidly about how he gave into the desires of lust and paid dearly for it. In Proverbs 5 he warns his son to stay away from the door of the temptress – as alluring as she may be – because though her lips drip honey, she will lead you down the path of death. Instead, Solomon tells his son, drink water from your own cistern and rejoice in the wife of your youth. Be satisfied and captivated by her love alone, and do not share that intimacy – physically or mentally – with anyone else.

Lust not only distorts the meaning of love, but secondly, **it ensnares us in a crippling pattern of bondage**. Researchers say that pornography can be just addictive as drugs or alcohol, if not more so. Our bodies produce a chemical called dopamine whenever we experience something exciting or rewarding. Dopamine is a great chemical – a gift from God. When you go bungee jumping or eat chocolate, dopamine is released. Once you experience it, you want more of it.

But things like drugs and pornography short-circuits the natural process through which dopamine is meant to be released and over-stimulates the brain, making it numb to pleasure. To get the same pleasure, you need more and more of it to get the same effect. Eventually, you become desensitized to it, and what was initially shocking and disgusting no longer bothers you.

Number three, lust is deadly because **it paralyzes our walk with God**. David kept his sin secret for several months, and during that time he was consumed with guilt and shame. He said, “When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer” (Psalm 32:3-4).

Those who have been locked in an ongoing pattern of lust know how David felt. Lust creates a barrier in your relationship with God. You don't sense His presence. You don't experience His peace and joy. You feel guilty – you want to stop – but you keep falling down which makes you feel even more guilt and more shame.

Many who are locked in a perpetual battle with lust wonder if there is any hope. Is victory even possible? The answer is yes. Listen to what Paul says in Romans 6:6-7, “For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.”

The gospel frees us from the power of sin. Sin is incredibly powerful, and apart from Christ, we're enslaved to our desires and impulses. We simply do not have the strength within ourselves to say no to sin. But a genuine conversion to Christ changes everything – He makes you a new creation – your old sinful self dies, and you have a new power to overcome sin and walk in freedom. Paul says in Romans 6:12, “Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.” He would not command this if it were not possible. No sin, including the addictive sin of lust, need rule you.

There are some wonderful Christian ministries solely dedicated to helping people come out of bondage to sexual sin – and I included information about one of them in the bulletin – and while each may take a different approach, they all agree on basic biblical principles or steps for overcoming lust. There are five of them.

The first step is to **surrender your lust to God**. One of the leading experts of sexual addiction is Steve Gallegher who has an online site called Pure Life Ministries, and who was at one point in his life in complete bondage to lust. He was asked one time what the success rate of his program was, and thought for a moment and said, “100%?” He said, “Every single man who desperately desires freedom, and comes before the Lord with a broken heart, and acts on the biblical principles we lay out for him, finds freedom from their habitual sin.”

One of the greatest obstacles to victory, he says, is the issue of control. Most people want to be free from the chains of sin, but they also want to maintain control over their lives. They want a quick fix – some solution or formula they can do, but without abandonment to Christ, they will remain a captive to sin. Their efforts to win the battle by their own methods and strength are doomed to failure as long as they remain in control.

The power to overcome sin comes only through surrender to God. A person must come to the point where they fall before the feet of Jesus and cry out, “Lord God, these chains are too strong for me, and there is nothing I can do to break them, you are my only hope!” David came to this point in Psalm 51:17 when he said, “My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.”

Amazing things begin to happen when we're broken and desperate for help – when we come to the Lord with a broken and repentant heart and say, “I've tried everything – you are my only hope. I surrender to you,” that is the point at which God's power comes upon us and sets us free.

The second step, according to every Christian expert, is to **confess your struggle with lust to another person**. James 5:16 says, “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.” Most men have an unwritten code of silence when it comes to their thought life. One counselor who has worked with thousands of men says, “I have never met anyone who has recovered from sexual addiction alone.” Confessing to someone that you've got a problem is the hardest step because lust is a secret sin. The power of pornography is its secrecy, and an important step in destroying its power is to confess to another person so that it's not a secret any more. Every person needs someone to be accountable to, someone to ask you the hard questions, and someone who will pray with you. You probably will not break your addiction if you don't tell someone else.

The third practical step you must take is to **close the doors of access to sin**. In Matthew 5:29-30, after Jesus talked about lusting in your heart, He went on to say, “If your right eye causes you to sin, 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 sin, 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.”

Jesus leaves no doubt how seriously He takes the sin of lust, and His solution is radical. He's obviously talking in hyperbole, or we would have a lot of missing eyes and hands here today, but His point is that we need to cut off whatever causes us to sin. The eye is one of the main avenues through which we are tempted. 1 John talks about the "lust of the eyes." Eve looked at the forbidden fruit and it was pleasing to the eye. She wanted it. David saw Bathsheba and desired her. The eye triggers a desire in our heart to possess something we don't have.

Where the eye speaks of the inward sin of lust and the desire to have something, the hand speaks of the outward act of sin. Eve saw the fruit with her eyes and then took the fruit with her hands. David saw Bathsheba and then he took her, he stole her from her husband, to commit the act of adultery.

Jesus is not suggesting, of course, that we actually pluck out our eyes and amputate our hands, but to deal radically with the source of sin – and the source of lust is our thoughts. He says, "Do whatever it takes to eliminate lust – even if it is painful. Gouge it out and cut it off. If, like King David, you are walking around your rooftop and you know that Bathsheba is down below at a certain time every evening – stay off the roof. Take a walk somewhere else. On the TV show Hee Haw, Doc Campbell is confronted by a patient who says he broke his arm in two places. Doc replies, "Well then, stay out of them places!" That's what Jesus is saying.

If your problem with lust has to do with what you see on a screen, then you need to do something with your screen. Either get a filter for your internet or perhaps just get off completely. If you find yourself attracted to someone not your wife or husband, don't put yourself in a position to foster that relationship. Cut it off. That's the point. Joseph is a great example of someone who dealt decisively with sin. When tempted by Potiphar's wife, he ran as fast as he could. He didn't pluck out his eye, but he dealt decisively with sin.

And yet a person can do all of these things – they can cry out to God for deliverance, they can find an accountability partner, they can put a filter on their computer, and yet they cannot seem to stop. There is an irresistible force that keeps pulling them back. Why is victory so elusive? This leads us to the fourth step that every Christian must take in overcoming the power of pornography is to **walk in God's power**. Galatians 5:16 says, "Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature." Steve Gallegher says that he has found no evidence to dispute the truth of this verse. He says, "Of the thousands of men and hundreds of pastors I have ministered to, not one had truly been walking in the Spirit prior to his fall."

To "walk in the Spirit," means that you do not try to overcome habits and temptations by your own power. Instead, you yield every day to the control of the Holy Spirit. It means that you establish a spiritual atmosphere in your inner life every day by the spiritual disciplines of worship, prayer, Bible study, and church attendance. By practicing these basic disciplines, you find growing within you a spiritual energy to help you when you are weak to temptation. It's exactly what Jesus meant when He said, "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

Gallegher says, "The key isn't so much resisting temptation as much as it is establishing new habits in the basic spiritual disciplines. Being connected with God everyday increases one's love for Him and, at the same time, weakens the attraction to sin." What wise counsel! Rather than trying hard to not look at things we shouldn't be looking at, stay busy and focused doing other things. Walk in the Spirit and stay focused every day on God.

The Apostle Paul gives young Timothy similar advice in 2 Timothy 2:22, “Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace...” Instead of spending all your energy trying to break this habit, use some of it to create a new habit. Listen to an encouraging message, read a good book, listen to some good music – intentionally create an alternative habit. Of course, establishing a new habit typically takes a good month or more. But once it is in place, it becomes increasingly more desirable. And scientific research says that developing new habits actually changes your brain and corrects the way dopamine is released. That is really good news. It’s vital that we walk in the power of God’s spirit.

The fifth step is: **determine to not give up the fight for purity**. A Christian man, who was in his 90s, was asked when – at what age – lust no longer is a problem, and he said, “You’ll have to ask someone older than me.” In a fallen, broken world we must contend with sin until the day we die. But we have a choice – we can fight or give in and give up. Knowing that victory is possible in Christ, we must choose to not give up

There’s a story tucked away in 2 Samuel 23 about a man named Eleazar, who was one of King David’s top three warriors in his army. In the heat of battle against the Philistines “the men of Israel retreated, but Eleazar stood his ground, and struck down the Philistines till his hand grew tired and froze to the sword. The Lord brought about a great victory that day.” Eleazar refused to be defeated and enslaved. Everybody else is running from the enemy, but He made a decision, and said, “I have had it with this running, I am going to fight, until I either drop dead, or until I drop to the field in victorious exhaustion.”

Today is the day when you can say, “I will not give up. I refuse to be a slave. I refuse to give up the fight. I’m not going to allow lust to dominate my life.” As we close in prayer, this is a great opportunity for you to surrender to the Lord whatever He is speaking to you about and say, “God, I need your help. I am powerless without you. I yield control of my life to you.”

Perhaps God is strongly prompting you to confess your sin to someone, and by taking that step you’ll feel like half the battle is won already.

Maybe God is calling you to take some radical steps in cutting off access to sin. And maybe the Holy Spirit has made you aware that you are not walking in the Spirit, and you want to take a step of yielding to Him today.