

7 Deadly Sins #7 – From Lust to Love

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8; Proverbs 5

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It has destroyed careers, relationships, families, marriages and lives. It has brought down or weakened celebrities, world leaders, professional athletes, CEO's, pastors, church leaders and many Christians. Yet it is something that is widely encouraged today. Advertisers appeal to it to get you to buy their product. Movies and TV shows celebrate it as natural and something that requires action. It has affected and probably afflicted people in this room.

What is it? Lust. The dictionary defines lust simply as **self-indulgent sexual desire**. That means looking, thinking or treating another person as an object for one's personal pleasure. Lust focuses our attention on ourselves and our desires. When stirred up, it can exert enormous pressure on us.

Some here today can relate very easily to the impact of someone acting on their lustful thoughts. You may have been the victim of sexual sin committed by someone else. Some of you have had your spouse cheat on you. Or you may, in the past, have acted on your lustful thoughts. It has lasting effect in your life today. But many have repented of that. God has forgiven and restored you. And now you go forward as a new creation into the days ahead.

But some here currently are acting upon lustful thoughts. You may be involved in a relationship you should not be involved in whether it's physical, emotional or online in some way. Some watch inappropriate movies or view explicit material. Maybe no one knows about it except God. Yet it deeply affects your thought life and relationships.

Some of us might think we can dismiss lust as irrelevant to our lives. We're not involved in an inappropriate relationship. We're not looking at something online. But we must realize that it's likely none of us have remained completely untouched by our lust-filled culture. We hear about it in songs. We see it in advertising on billboards, or pop up ads on our phones or TV ads. We see lust in drama and comedy series on TV and in movies. We may have gotten to the point where we rate a movie as okay because it only had 1 sex scene and they don't show too much. We see it throughout our culture because of the widespread disregard for God and His ways.

But we're not in a hopeless situation. We aren't the first group of God's people to live in a culture that thinks God's boundaries for sex are crazy. The ancient Israelites had to deal with this. The pagan nations surrounding them incorporated sexual practices into their worship. The early church had to deal with it. Greek culture carried on the tradition of mixing sex with worship. The Romans adopted these practices and spread them throughout the empire.

So we face nothing new. God's people have always endured mocking and persecution for trying to abide by His standards. But will we hold God and His standards in this area in high regard despite what almost everyone else says? Will we take up the fight against lust and pursue holiness in dependence upon Jesus and the Holy Spirit?

That's what we'll look at today.

This is the last in the series of messages on the 7 deadly sins from the book of Proverbs. Next week we will begin the series "Why is Jesus worth following?" from the Gospel of Mark. We're going to deal with lust today by first learn biblical definitions of lust and love. Then we will look at God's path to help us leave behind lust and move towards deeper love.

So first, let's discover a Biblical definition of lust. This comes from the New Testament passage of 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8. (Page 838 in the Bibles in front of you).

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 (ESV)

4 Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. ²For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. ³For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality;⁴ that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, ⁵ not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; ⁶ so that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. ⁷For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. ⁸Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

The Apostle Paul wrote this passage to a group of new Christians living in the ancient Greek city of Thessalonica. According to Acts 17:4, the church was quite diverse. "And some of them (them being Jews in the synagogue) were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many Greeks and not a few of the leading women (of the city)." But some Jews did not accept Paul & Silas' teaching that Jesus is the Messiah. So they stirred up the city against Paul and his message. It got so bad, that Paul and Silas were sent away at night to escape. So Paul had to leave before he wanted to. So he writes to encourage them and give instruction on what it looks like to live the Christian life. Part of this instruction includes our passage today.

Here we find a Biblical definition of lust. I get this from John Piper who authored the chapter on Lust in the little book Killjoys. It goes like this. **Lust is a sexual desire that dishonors its object and disregards God.** Sexual desire is in

itself good. It was created by God to be expressed in the proper place. But it was made to be governed by honor towards the other person and regard for God.

So let's look at the first part of this definition.

Yet **lust dishonors the other person**. We see this in verses 3-5. "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that each one of you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his or her own body in holiness and honor not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God." So God wills for our sanctification which means to become holy in our thoughts, words and actions. But what does it look like to grow in holiness? Verse 3 – "Abstain from sexual immorality. That means the Christian must abstain or not participate in any sexual activity outside of the God-ordained boundary of male/female marriage.

What else is God's will for holiness? Verse 4 – That each of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor." Now some of your translations may offer an alternative to the phrase "control his own body" – like "know how to take a wife for himself" or "know how to possess his own vessel." But we don't have to figure out exactly what that means because the principle is the same. We are to know how to act in holiness and honor with respect to sex. Then he provides the opposite of acting in holiness and honor in verse 5. "Not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles do who do not know God." So lust is the opposite of acting with holiness towards God and honor towards others. So lust dishonors the other person.

But someone might immediately disagree with that point and claim that they actually are honoring the other person if it is two consenting people. That's what the law and our society now says is acceptable. But that is far from God's understanding of honor. He established marriage in which a man and a woman make a lifelong commitment to honor one another with faithfulness and love. So within that relationship, sexual desire becomes the servant and spice of that covenant bond of mutual honor.

So according to God, it dishonors the other person when a person wants to have sex with them outside of the marriage covenant. It dishonors them because it says (with or without using words) "I want you to satisfy my sexual desire, but I do not want you as a covenant partner in marriage." Or more crassly, "I want to use your body for my pleasure but I do not want you as a whole person." This can lead to problems. Tim Keller writes this: "Sex without a promise for mutual whole-life commitment can lead one party to make a far greater emotional investment than the

other with agonizing results. Or it can teach both parties to use sex for pleasure only and not radical self-giving.” He also writes, “Lust is sexual desire minus a commitment to another person.” God’s way is to give ourselves only to someone to whom we’ve given ourselves wholly, legally and permanently in marriage. But when people have sex outside of marriage, maintaining their independence to walk away at any time, it turns sex into a dispensed commodity. Both persons remain somewhat detached and in control.

But there might be some people who would say they are very committed to the person they’re having sex with outside of marriage. They don’t see it as self-indulgent at all. They have demonstrated self-sacrifice. They have remained faithful. They see themselves being together for their entire lives. They’re just not married or not married yet. So it’s not lust. That may describe a type of love that the world regards as acceptable and valid.

But the second part of the Biblical definition of lust clarifies this. Remember lust is a sexual desire that dishonors the other person and disregards God. So you can have two unmarried people who are committed to each other and promise to be together and have sacrificed for the other person. But if they have sex, they have disregarded God by ignoring His boundaries. We see this in verses 7-8. “For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God who gives his Holy Spirit in you.” That means thinking its ok to have sex outside of marriage is not just a change in opinion of people today compared to 100 years ago. It disregards God Himself. It is a common practice among those who don’t know God. Did you see that in verse 5? “Not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who don’t know God.”

The root of lust then is a lack of regard for God. Holiness has supreme regard for God. Lust is sexual desire that is not regulated, governed or guided by a supreme regard for God. Think what that says about our society today. Our current culture has completely and comprehensively rejected this boundary. In doing that it rejects supreme regard for God. Today, the culture affirms and allows for all kinds of sexual behavior outside God’s boundary. Therefore, it is plainly obvious that we live in a society saturated with lust. We are encouraged to lust and act on our sexual desires however we want to, whenever we want to and with whoever we want to.

Now you might think this makes too big of a deal out of lust especially if it just remains in our minds. There’s a couple of ways we can minimize the danger of lust. You might think this from one of two angles. One way, compared to world issues, lust is pretty minor. Piper writes, “Many people say ‘Why is lust a big deal? Shouldn’t we get on with

bigger issues like global pandemics, human trafficking, terrorist threats and vast poverty? What counts is whether you fight these massive social and global evils. Sexual freedom (and lust) is no big deal when you stand against racial injustice and trafficking. Looking at porn is utterly insignificant if you are on your way to a global warming conference.’ That is the mindset of millions. That is the way the human mind reasons when a supreme regard for God has been forsaken.”¹ So one way we can ignore lust is by minimizing its importance compared to global issues.

But there’s another way we can do this that may be very common among Christians. It goes something like this. “I know that lust is wrong in God’s eyes. But I’ve received Christ and I’m going to heaven based on His sacrifice on the cross. So my salvation is secure. I certainly need to grow in holiness and deal with my lust problem at some point. But it’s not threatening my salvation or my soul.”

But such thinking carries great danger. Look at verse 6. “Let no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter because the Lord is an avenger in all these things as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you.” Do you see what this verse says? “The Lord is an avenger in all these things.” What things? Sexual immorality; not controlling our own bodies in holiness and honor; living in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who don’t know God. This talks about God’s vengeance on Judgment Day.

“Well then he’s talking about non-Christians who have rejected Him.” Yes. “So if I’m a Christian and have received Christ into my heart, I’m still okay.” Be careful. So many Christians believe that if they receive Christ as Savior but wage no war against their sin – they’ll still be okay. But there are countless warnings in the Bible that state if we don’t wage war against our sin, it brings our salvation into question. I don’t mean that we might lose our salvation. I mean that we may never have been saved in the first place. There are certainly times when we may wander from the Lord for a season. But the truly saved come back and repent just like David did in the Old Testament. The truly saved are troubled by their sin. If we are okay with lust in our lives, that’s a huge red flag to stop and take notice.

Preacher Martin Lloyd-Jones said this. “Be careful how you treat God, my friends. You may say to yourself, “I can sin against God and then, of course, I can repent and go back and find God whenever I want him.” You try it. And you will sometimes find that not only can you not find God but that you do not even want to. You will be aware of a terrible hardness in your heart. And you can do nothing about it. And then you suddenly realize that it is God punishing

¹ John Piper, Killjoys: The Seven Deadly Sins, Marshall Segal, Editor; © 2015 Desiring God, 88.

you in order to reveal your sinfulness and your vileness to you. And there is only one thing to do. You turn back to him and you say, "O God, do not go on dealing with me judicially, though I deserve it. Soften my heart. Melt me. I cannot do it myself." You cast yourself utterly upon his mercy and upon his compassion." Jesus did not die so we could tolerate sin in our lives. He died so we might have victory over sin. So we dare not treat this lightly lest we lose our souls.

Now that's a lot about lust. Well, we needed to debunk or expose some of the false belief about lust out there. I hope the Holy Spirit uses that to stir us up to act. If that's lust, what is love in this area? **Sexual desire that honors your spouse with supreme regard for God.** We can all apply this definition of love to our lives. If we're married, we express ourselves sexually to our spouse alone in a way that honors them and shows regard for God.

If you are engaged to be married or in a serious dating relationship, you likely have a strong sexual desire for the other person. But love shows supreme regard for God. So you abstain until you get married. That protects you from unnecessary baggage if the relationship were to end before that time.

If you are single and not in a dating relationship, your supreme regard for God demands a high calling of you especially in our lust-filled culture. But you really need to trust God that He has your best in mind. So you are called to celibacy – to not engage in any sexual relations – unless you get married. Our world cannot comprehend such a life. Our world tells us that our sexual feelings define who we are. Therefore, to suppress them is to suppress our humanness and our identity. Some even consider it cruel to mention celibacy just because a person is not married. They argue that this deprives a person from being fully human.

But Jesus never had sex. He experienced a fully human life with friendship and deep healthy relationships. He experienced family and had lots of interaction with children. Some today have seriously taken up this calling upon their lives. One contemporary example who I really appreciate is Sam Allberry, author of the book "Is God anti-gay?" He is same-sex attracted. The world says he should be free to express his sexuality. But Sam has decided that he will show supreme regard for God. So he won't act on his attraction. That's an example of what Paul called out of the Thessalonian Christians. He reminded them that their new found faith in God now affected every area of their lives.

What path must we follow to move from lust to love? **Receive God's Gospel.** The Gospel is God's rescue plan for sinners. He sent His Son Jesus Christ to live on the earth. He lived a perfectly sinless life. He resisted every temptation that came his way including the temptations to lust. He was willing to be our substitute to pay the penalty for our lust.

He died so that we could be forgiven of and freed from our lust. So when we receive Christ, we receive forgiveness from God. We are clothed with the righteousness of Christ. We get a new life and become a new creation. Then we grow in holiness by continued faith in Christ and His power to transform us into His likeness.

Second, **Reorient your view of sex to God's wisdom.** God created sex and affirms it within the boundaries of marriage. All other expressions of sex are outside this boundary. But within the boundary, God expects us to enjoy His gift. A great example of this is found back in Proverbs 5. This Proverb warns the young man against going near someone who is not his wife. But after the warning, he writes verse 15-19.

Proverbs 5:15-19

Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well. Should your springs be scattered abroad, streams of water in the streets? Let them be for yourself alone, and not for strangers with you. Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight. Be intoxicated with her love.” And you thought the Bible was boring!

The cistern or the well is the young man's wife. So husbands think of your wives and wives think of your husbands. Drink from your own well, that of your spouse. Don't give your love to strangers on the streets. Don't give your affections to another. Keep them for your spouse. And be intoxicated always in their love. So here's the one place in the Bible where it says it's okay to get intoxicated. But not on drink – not on drugs – but on your spouse's love in your physical relationship. That is a great blessing and gift from God.

Third, **Take up the fight against lust.** This strategy also comes from John Piper who put together the acronym ANTHEM to fight lust. I've put the reference on your bulletin. So each letter forms part of the strategy.

A—Avoid

Avoid, as much as possible and reasonable, the sights and situations that arouse unfitting desire. He says “possible and reasonable” because some exposure to temptation is inevitable. And he says “unfitting desire” because not all desires for sex, food, and family are bad. But avoid situations that arouse lustful desires.

N—No

Say no to every lustful thought right away. And say it boldly with the authority of Jesus Christ. “In the name of Jesus, No!” You don't have much more than a few seconds. Give the lustful thought more unopposed time than that, and it will

lodge itself with such force as to be almost immovable. As John Owen said, “Be killing sin or it will be killing you.” Strike fast and strike hard. “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7).

T—Turn

Turn the mind forcefully toward Christ as a superior satisfaction. Saying “no” will not suffice. You must move from defense to offense. Fight fire with fire. Attack the inferior promises of sin with the superior promises of Christ. Romans 8:28 - And we know in all things God works for the good of those who love Him. (Better than any lustful intention.) Focus on the cross and Christ on it for your sin - instead of that image.

H—Hold

Hold the promise and the pleasure of Christ firmly in your mind until it pushes the other images out. “Fix your eyes on Jesus” (Heb. 12:2). Here is where many fail. They give in too quickly. They say, “I tried to push it out, and it didn’t work.” I ask, “How long did you try?” A minute? Five? Ten? How long did you make war on this one temptation? How hard did you exert your mind? The mind is a muscle. You can flex it with vehemence. Take the kingdom violently (Matt. 11:12). Be brutal. Hold the promise of Christ before your eyes. Hold it. Hold it! Fight! For Christ’s sake, fight until you win. If an electric garage door were about to crush your child you would hold it up with all your might and holler for help, and hold it and hold it and hold it and hold it. Until it cut your fingers off.

E—Enjoy

Enjoy the superior satisfaction of Christ. One reason lust reigns in so many is that Christ has so little appeal. We default to deceit because we have little delight in Christ. What steps have you taken to waken affection for Jesus? Have you fought for joy? You were created to treasure Christ with all your heart—more than you treasure sex or sugar or sports or shopping. If you have little taste for Jesus, competing pleasures will triumph. Plead with God for the satisfaction you don’t have: “Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love that we may rejoice and be glad all our days” (Ps. 90:14).

M—Move

Move into a useful activity away from idleness and other vulnerable behaviors. Lust grows fast in the garden of leisure. Find good work to do, and do it with all your might. “Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord” (Rom. 12:11). Get up and do something. Sweep a room. Hammer a nail. Write a letter. Fix a faucet. And do it for Jesus’s sake.

You were made to manage and create. Christ died to make you “zealous for good works” (Titus 2:14). Displace deceitful lusts with a passion for good deeds.

Follow this strategy to fight lust in your life.

Someone wrote “Sex is like fire. Kept in the fireplace, it heats your home, marriage. Outside of the fireplace it can burn down your house. Kept within, sex can warm your home. But outside of marriage it can burn down your life. God provides rescue and restoration from the destructive effects of lust. Jesus resisted every temptation. Jesus death provides us with victory over sin. So we can begin, restart or continue in the journey towards holiness because of God’s grace and help.

Receive the Gospel. Confess our toleration of lust in our lives. Confess and begin the journey of restoration from acting on lust. Ask God to awaken satisfaction in Christ in us. All of us need to pray and ask for the Holy Spirit to grow us further in holiness.