

## **Introduction**

Several years ago, a young man who was trying to follow Jesus came to my office and asked me this, "**How do I stop lusting?**" That's a vital question is it? Author Joe Seaborn wrote a book titled *Winning Over Temptation*. In the early stages of his research for the book, he conducted a survey that asked people only two questions. First, what is the number one temptation in your life? And second, how old are you? The results of the survey were fascinating because they show what people's temptations are in the different phases of life. Here's where lust placed in each phase: 10 to 15 years-old – the 4<sup>th</sup> strongest temptation; 16 to 20 – 1<sup>st</sup>; 21 to 30 – 1<sup>st</sup>; 31 to 40 – 1<sup>st</sup>; 41 to 50 – 3<sup>rd</sup>; 51 to 60 – 2<sup>nd</sup>; 61 to 70 – 3<sup>rd</sup>; and 71 and older – didn't make the list.

That survey and our own life experiences make it clear. Lust is one of the strongest of all temptations, which is why Jesus preached about it in the passage I read, Matthew 5:27-30.

## **Adultery**

In Matthew 5:21-48, Jesus gives us a series of six contrasts between the righteousness of the Pharisees and the righteousness of God's kingdom. He introduces each contrast with a formula, "**You heard that it was said . . . but I say to you.**" Let's examine the second of those in verses 27-30, which is about sexual righteousness.

According to verse 27, the Pharisees defined sexual righteousness in terms of the seventh commandment, "**You shall not commit adultery.**" If you are married, you shall not have sexual relations with someone not your spouse. If you are not married, you shall not have sexual relations with someone who is.

You might think that's a given – that we don't even have to say it. Unfortunately, in our current cultural setting, just as in that of Jesus, we do. As Dallas Willard points out, most writers in ethics today think that adultery is okay if it's done in the right way. To some, it's done in the

right way if no child is conceived. The prohibition isn't against sexual relations, they argue, but adulterating the family lineage. To others, it's done in the right way if the people involved have romantic feelings for each other. That seems to be, in fact, the most common view in America today. If there are romantic feelings and mutual consent, then sexual relations are never wrong whether they're pre-marital or extra-marital.

That may be the current view but it certainly isn't the correct one. The celebrated Greek philosopher, Aristotle, said it well. There is no such thing as "**committing adultery with the right woman, at the right time, and in the right way, for it is simply wrong.**" That is the Biblical view. There is no such thing as adultery done in the right way. There may be no child. There may be romantic feelings and mutual consent. But it is still wrong – always and absolutely wrong.

So the Pharisees weren't wrong about teaching, "**You shall not commit adultery.**"

## **Lust**

What they were wrong about was teaching that "**You shall not commit adultery**" is enough. Jesus contends in verse 28 that we can keep the seventh commandment and still not be right sexually before God. It isn't enough not to commit adultery. Just as importantly, we must not "**look with lust**" as well. So let's try to understand that.

First, let's determine what looking with lust is not. Remember the young man who asked me, "**How do I stop lusting?**" I replied by asking him how he lusted. He answered that when he sees an attractive girl, he immediately feels sexual desire. But I'll tell you what I told him. That isn't looking with lust. Seeing someone and immediately feeling sexual desire isn't something we can avoid. It's an initial spontaneous response instead that God put in us for a reason – to assure that we'll be fruitful and multiply. It isn't looking with lust. It isn't sin.

Now that we know what looking with lust is not, let's determine what it is. Jesus defines it in verse 28. The Greek wording here is easily

translated and its meaning clear. We look at someone for the purpose of sexual desiring him or her. We desire to sexually desire, in other words. We see someone and initial spontaneous sexual desire rises in us. But we don't wave it off. We indulge it instead. We keep on looking for the purpose of continuing to experience sexual desire. If we don't see the person, we can achieve the same purpose by visualizing him or her in our mind. Either way, what we're doing is sin.

Jill and I were having dinner at Taco Bell, when several high school girls walked in. The table of high school boys next to us immediately began staring at and talking about them. It didn't take a rock scientist to figure out what they were doing. They were looking for the purpose of sexually desiring those girls. They were sinning.

But looking or even visualizing to sexually desire can and often does go a step further. That step is to use our imagination and fantasize about having sex with the person. We picture ourselves in our mind sexually engaging him or her. That too, like looking, is sin.

It is in fact the sin of adultery. Jesus makes that perfectly clear in verse 8. If we look at someone not our spouse to sexually desire, or if we fantasize about sexually engaging someone not our spouse, we are committing what He calls "**adultery in our heart.**" Those two things are on the same continuum as the act of adultery is. Adultery never just happens on its own. It always happens instead as the result of looking and/or fantasizing. Jesus knew that and so should we.

## **Pornography**

Verse 28 speaks powerfully to one of the critical issues of our day, pornography. Pornography is a demonic force not just in our current culture but in the church as well. I can tell you from my own counseling experience that it's far more pervasive among Christians than most of you would guess. The American Family Association, for instance, claims that 40% of pastors have been or are into pornography on a regular basis. The Internet of course has made it far more accessible and thus

widespread than it has ever been.

Pornography, by definition, is looking with lust and a distortion of sexuality. That it's so widely and shamelessly practiced doesn't diminish its perverseness. It only highlights it instead. C.S. Lewis makes that very point in his book *Mere Christianity*. In his chapter on sexual morality, he writes: **"Now suppose you came to a country where you could fill a theatre by simply bringing a covered plate on to the stage and then slowly lifting the cover so as to let everyone see, just before the lights went out, that it contained a mutton chop or bit of bacon. Should you not think that in that country something had gone wrong with the appetite for food."** It's the same way with sex, he goes on to say. The various forms of pornography – strip tease shows, magazines, videos, and so on - show that something has gone horribly wrong with our culture's sexual appetite, and the appetite of those who participate in those things.

Don't let our sex saturated culture fool you. There isn't anything trivial about pornography. The logical truth is this. All lust is adultery in the heart. Pornography is lust. Pornography, therefore, is adultery in the heart. It's a sinful distortion of sex.

### **Not To Be Lustful**

That then is the contrast Jesus draws in verses 27-28. The Pharisees say that we're right sexually before God if we don't commit adultery. But He says that we must not look with lust as well.

But even that, He teaches in verses 29-30, isn't enough to make us right sexually before God. In these two verses, Jesus uses a logical device called *Reductio ad Absurdum*. This device proves a proposition wrong by following its implications to a logical but absurd consequence. The proposition He is proving wrong was a teaching of the Pharisees. It's that righteousness is a matter of correct behaviors. If that were true, Jesus contends, then we could avoid sinning and be righteous by mutilating our body. So, if we cut out our tongue, we can't gossip. Or in

sexual terms, if we gouge out our eyes and cut off our hands, we can't look with lust and commit adultery. That in turn, according to the teaching of the Pharisees, would make us righteous. Yes, we'd be mutilated stumps. But it's better to be mutilated and acceptable to God than whole and go to hell.

Church leaders like St. Anthony in the 4<sup>th</sup> century actually adopted a version of that strategy. They defined sexual righteousness in terms of behavior. It's not looking with lust. So they assured they wouldn't by developing the cenobitic or enclosed communal life. In that life, they didn't allow themselves to be in the presence of a woman or even see one, including their mothers and sisters. That went on for years.

But grasp what Jesus is saying in verses 29-30. We can be mutilated stumps but still have evil hearts. We can be rendered unable to look with lust and unable to commit adultery but still have hearts that desire to and would if we could. That implies that the essence of sexual righteousness isn't what we do but what we are. Don't get me wrong. Acts are important. But as Jesus teaches us here, what we are determines what we do. So, being right sexually before God doesn't mean not looking with lust. It means not being lustful in the first place.

That insight reveals what our aim should be. It shouldn't be not to look with lust. It should be to become the kind of person who isn't lustful. If we are lustful, we will look with lust. If we are not lustful, we will not. So become the kind of person who isn't lustful.

### **How To Become Not Lustful**

But how do we become that in a sex saturated culture? There's only one way that I know of. It's to experience God. To be right sexually before God, we must be intimate relationally with God.

One of the things that Protestants criticize about the Catholic Church is requiring priests to be celibate. Hearing those stories about priestly indiscretions only reinforces our point of view. But there is another side to this. Tony Campolo tells about a conversation he had

with a Franciscan monk. In it, he explained to Campolo in detail how his brother monks and he experienced God - so closely that they were fed with His glory and grace. He then said and I quote him: **“Now do you understand why we celibate monks are satiated? Do you get some sense as to where we find contentment that some think can never be known saved in the arms of a woman?”** Do you get what he’s saying? There is an eroticism, not physically, but spiritually in experiencing the triune God. It’s an eroticism that satisfies us and makes us not lustful, not preoccupied with sexual things.

That’s quite a claim, but it’s true. So, pursue and engage the triune and living God. I’ve preached and taught in detail how to do that. It’s by devotedly practicing certain central activities like solitude, silence, study, prayer, fasting, worship, and the practice of God’s presence. Those activities, practiced devotedly, create an intimacy with God that can satisfy the deepest longings of our bodily and psychological lives.

I read about a church going man who was so addicted to pornography that it destroyed his marriage. He eventually conquered his addiction though and explained how he did – primarily through the daily worship of God. His comment in that regard is penetrating. Even sexual habits can’t stand up under the wholehearted and persistent worship of God.

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## **Conclusion**

Most of you know the term “the seven deadly sins?” They’re the sins the church has historically viewed as the roots of all the others. They are as follows: anger, greed, pride, lust, envy, gluttony, and sloth. My point in closing is this. Lust is two things: the number one temptation for most people and one of the deadliest of all sins. But if we devotedly pursue and engage God, it won’t be either to us.