

“The Seven Deadly Sins Today: Lust”

Exodus 32: 1–10 Matthew 5: 27–30

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One of the great many things I appreciate about HOH is how well you listen to my sermons.

One of our HOH member came up to me this week and suggested that we add more time for silence confession. He said, “I used to think it was too long, I had nothing to confess. Now after series on the Seven Deadly Sins, it’s not enough time. He playfully suggested maybe 15 minutes. I’m Glad to know this series is working.

The Seven Deadly sins is a theological construct that is ancient. If you talk about Seven Deadly Sins, sooner or later you have to talk about Lust. Some of you may feel uncomfortable thinking about it. Not nearly as uncomfortable as I feel talking about it. So, as they say in the movies, let us talk of this today, and then make a pact never to speak of this again.

There is a lot of shame and guilt that people have thinking about sexuality. We end up with a lot of unspoken questions and beliefs.

You know the story of the young man, buffeted about by his feeling of desire, He was troubled by how much it influence it had on his life. He went to a wise old friend who had turned 90 that year. The young man asked, “How old will I be before I stop being over whelmed by my sexual desires?” His friend answered, “Beats me, but it’s not at 90.”

It is important to remember, God was the one who created human sexuality in the creation stories: Genesis 1 and 2. God created it, blessed it, called it good, and said, be fruitful and multiply. Human sexuality starts out clearly as a blessing of God to us. We need to remember that and celebrate human sexuality is a gift given to us by God. As a blessing, we should honor it and be able to talk about it openly.

Unfortunately, almost as soon as it is created, the human beings take this good thing and end up distorting it. People of faith have been wrestling with the topic ever since.

One way of thinking about human sexuality is to lay down a series of rules. Unfortunately, what a rule based approach often does is to end up denying our human nature in a series of “thou shalt not” type rules. When you break the rules, there is a lot of guilt and shame. So people end up repressed. Repressed People then put in a pressure cooker situation: they put a lid on it, clamp it down tight, the pressure builds up, and then it explodes.

Emil Brunner said the problem is we come to think that rule based ethics are the most serious. There are other ways of thinking about ethics than rules. That is what we are doing this Lent: we are not talking about rules, we are focusing on character.

Character does not tell you what to do; what rules to follow. Character asks: Who do you want to be? What are your actions leading you to become? What kind of community would form? How are your attitudes and actions shaping you as a people? Who is God calling us to be and to become? Character ethics asks: what trajectory are you on in life's journey? If you practice this sort of character, where are you heading? Where will you end up?

I think this leads to a lot of reflection and a much more healthy approach to the moral issue of human sexuality. It puts sexuality in terms of character that develops over time. It may be a struggle. Saint Augustine: wild man in his young days. He found faith, yet struggled. He journals, praying for chastity, saying, "Lord, make me chaste, but not yet." You see the struggle.

When it comes to sin, character ethics are not focused on one action or even a few, but rather the series of actions over time that lead to the formation of character and community.

Character ethics ends up talking about Lust more along the lines of what Luther said: If a bird lands on your head, it's not a sin. If it builds a nest there, it is.

I love studying the Bible. You study it long enough, you discover insights you may never have seen before. The story of the golden calf. We all heard it in Sunday School. We were taught to Focus was all about the gold. It's the GOLDEN calf. We think the gold is the idol. But they never taught us what the calf stood for. Start out with a better translation: it is not a calf. The idol was of a virile young bull. The Israelites danced around the symbol of this virile young bull, a symbol of fertility religion. Fertility religion's worship was participatory worship. So when Exodus says, people worshiped the golden calf, "they sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play," what do you think they were playing? It wasn't golf. It wasn't hockey. It wasn't bingo.

The Bible sees the problem as being that unbridled sexuality is not going to save you. That ends up being, as our Presbyterian Confession of 1967 puts it, sexual anarchy. Anarchy in the most important relationships in a society: Family.

Family is a group of people who depend upon each other. When you can depend upon each other. Healthy family life is like a ballet: where you can leap and you know there is someone there to catch you. Family is the key to order and goodness and a blessed life.

It is here that the theological question of lust becomes most important. A basic definition of lust is an enduring, unchecked and enduring quest to fulfill sensual desire. But the stability, the trust, the fidelity of family never happens, when the bonds of family are broken with a lack of trust and fidelity.

Dante, in the Inferno, gives us two important insights. First of all, for Dante the worst of the sins are at the bottom of the Inferno. Those who practice lust are not at the bottom of the Inferno, they are at the top. Some people are thinking: that's a relief. Dante recognizes we are all human: have feelings of desire.

But here Dante indicates the difference. Dante says that just inside the gates of the Inferno, there is a giant whirlwind. A tornado. The souls of those whose lives have been shaped by lust, are there. Twirling forever in the tornado.

Those who lusted after each other can see each other, they twirl nearby each other, but they never touch. They had their touch in life, but they were never trustworthy and connected. So now in the afterlife, they are near each other, but forever apart.

The image of lust is of passion that acts without thinking. Thomas Aquinas saw lust as the most voracious of appetites. He saw it as a danger that is likely to disrupt the personality of the individual. He writes, that the consequence of lust is that it disorders the higher powers, that is to say, reason and will

When acted upon, it is a vice that tears lives apart, like a tornado. Lust makes people do crazy things, creates chaos for the people around them. Sow the wind, reap the whirlwind.

Lust is about driving down the road of life with the motor of our passions running full throttle, but leaving our rationality asleep at the wheel. Disordered lust creates chaos. It makes people do the most ridiculous things. Lust lulls to sleep reason and the will, and leaves us in a fantasy world.

Reason makes sure that we deal with reality. And reality has certain limits and boundaries. To lose our reason means that we are in danger of infinite desiring. That is lust: living in a fantasy world of desire that creates a tornado of chaos.

Good Christian theology assumes that sexuality is created by God, and it is a gift of God. But it is so powerful, it is like nitroglycerine: A little bit can keep your heart going; too much can cause an explosion.

When our natural needs are beyond reason, they turn voracious and insatiable. It disrupts the health of society. It disrupts the health of the person. It tears marriages apart. It can tear families apart for decades.

There is a modern Italian story writer, Tommy Landolina, who wrote a story called, "Golgol's Wife." The main character is an obsessive fellow named Golgol. He is fairly normal except that he decided to marry ... a rubber balloon. An inflatable dummy who assumes different shapes and sizes. Gogol names her Caracas. Gogol lusts after Caracas in all her various forms. For years, things go very well. Then Gogol becomes obsessively jealous. (Actually, Gogol comes down with a STD and blames the balloon.) First he accuses Caracas of thinking only of herself. Then he accuses her of

unfaithfulness. Then in a rage he tells her she is too religious. Finally, in a fit of wrath, he deliberately pumps too much air into Caracas. She bursts and scatters into the air.

What an insane story! That is lust. An infinite desire to shape reality to our infinite whim and exercise infinite control. If that sounds like any of those characters accused of lust, that is what they are after: power and control.

Look how differently Jesus handles a related issue on the topic of divorce. Notice what Jesus is doing in the Gospel of Matthew. His opponents are zeroing in on adultery and lust as questions of a specific law. Jesus avoids the legalism, and reinterprets the situation in terms of character.

Jesus says: The two have become one flesh. But if the body has become severely infected, gangrene may set in. The most life-giving thing to do may be an amputation. Which is to say: If some relationship has died, then cut it off.

The best thing to do is divorce. He does not want someone causing some sort of destructive life stuck in a loveless marriage, and destructive lust that would tear people's lives apart.

In other words divorce is permitted: it is far better solution than the pressure cooker that may explode and tear lives to shreds.

So when you talk about Vice, you also have to talk about the corresponding virtue. So if the disease is the vice of lust, the prevention is the virtue of love.

In the Old Testament, the word for sexual love is Yada: to know. That is the phrase, the euphemism in the Bible that stands for sexual relations. Stop and consider the profound wisdom and insight in that phrase. To know another is the ultimate experience of human touching love. It has the meaning of profound understanding, connection, and oneness. It is to experience the infinite wonder of another human being. The wonder of knowing the right person, the right partner will take a lifetime to discover.

I have two friends. They are both on their second marriage. He is 90. She is 70. I call him up. It's 11:00 in the morning. He says, "We just got up from the breakfast table. We've been talking for 3 hours. Every morning, I can't wait to wake up, to hear what she has to say."

That's love. 1st Corinthians 13 says about love: to know as we are known. The love we experience with God. We experience God's blessing in the true knowing of our partner.

Love is about knowing one another, appreciating, admiring, a sense of awe, and wonder, so much that there is a healthy yearning and desiring. Ultimate touching love. To know, and to be known.

And if it takes a lifetime to discover, then it requires a commitment: to be, to the best of your ability, together for a lifetime. A commitment to be family. Building a relationship that can withstand any tornado of lust. Jesus leads us into a new world: redefined by love.

As Shakespeare puts it

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.

O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;

It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.

Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;

Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom. (Sonnet 116)

Love is a ever-fixed mark
that looks on tempests and the tornado of lust,
and is never shaken.

To paraphrase Corinthians: Make love be your guide, and your goal,
As we shape our character, our families, our church and our community,
In the ways of the love of God, revealed in the love of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Sources:

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