

A Study of LUST (*luxuria*)

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“In a nutshell, lust is the excessive desire for my own sexual pleasure.” – Rebecca DeYoung¹

Did Jesus really not think about sex as much as we do?

In *The Da Vinci Code*, a 2003 book authored by Dan Brown, Jesus is said to have had an intimate relationship with Mary Magdalene and fathered children with her. Even though it is absolutely false, William Willimon notes that it does tell us a whole lot about ourselves:

“That we should have such curiosity about the sexuality of Jesus, his possible romantic attachments, Mary Magdalene as a girlfriend, and so on, is telling. We can’t image a human being who is not obsessed with sex. We cannot follow a Savior for whom sexuality was not a major, defining concern.”²

So we sex-crazed sinners try to drag Jesus down into the dirt with us. But we don’t have to do that because He already did it Himself. He came into the filth of our world, faced every sexual temptation that you face, and yet He remained perfectly pure for you. As we will see, the only hope against LUST is forgiveness, new life, and a clean heart in Jesus.

What is LUST?

We should be careful that we don’t define lust as simply any passion or sexual desire. That’s far too broad. Lust is sexual passion or desire that is not rightly ordered. Sexual intercourse, passion, and desire are all good gifts of God when they are rightly ordered within love of God and love of my neighbor. Like all the other vices, lust takes something good that God gave us and completely disorders it. The word lust comes from the Latin *luxuria* which simply means “excess”. Lust is a good thing in excess. As one author says, sex is like nitroglycerin, “it can be used to either blow up bridges or heal hearts.”³

So if LUST is just a good thing in excess, is it all that bad?

Lust’s deadly character is its extreme *self-love*. Lust is ALL ABOUT ME. It reduces everything to “my sexual pleasure”. You can even see it in our words. We don’t say sexual *intercourse* anymore, but it’s just simply *sex*. What happened to the intercourse? The other person doesn’t matter anymore. We talk about doing *it*. It’s not about another person, in other words, but only about *it*, the sexual pleasure.

Sex is for loving another person and creating another life, but we don’t want any of that risky business. We just want our pleasure. “What is sex and what is it for? First, sex is an act designed to bond two people together into a one-flesh union. Second, it’s an act designed to create new human beings—babies. What’s at stake in sex? Love and life. Human relationships and human existence. It’s hard to see how one could overemphasize the importance of something like that.”⁴

What even is pleasure?

Americans rush after pleasure like it’s the entirety of life. But the problem with pleasure is that you can’t bottle it up and sell it. Pleasure isn’t an activity itself, but always the fruit of an activity. I’m going to quote at length here from Rebecca DeYoung because I find this point so helpful:

“The paradox of pleasure...is that you can’t get it by seeking it directly. Aristotle said that pleasure is an effect of certain activities done in a certain way; it is the fruit of activity, but not something that can be

produced or achieved without the activity itself. Pleasure is also relative to the activity it accompanies. The pleasure of sitting in the sunshine is not the same thing as the pleasure of reading a good book. The pleasure of reading a gripping drama is not the same as the pleasure of reading an action adventure novel. The pleasure of reading to myself is not the same as the pleasure of reading to my children.

Sexual pleasure is like this too. It explains why the pleasure of the porn user requires rapid escalation of sexual stimulation, while a happily married person can still thoroughly enjoy conventional sex decades into a marriage to the same spouse. Sexual pleasure—both its quality and its ability to satisfy—depends on the activity from which you get it. The lustful one gets the sham, shallow version of sexual pleasure, the physical rush that feels great for a moment but cannot satisfy for more than a moment either. It's not news to anyone that studies consistently show the highest sexual satisfaction among those in faithful, monogamous marriages, not those whose sex lives are promiscuous. Why? Because in these marriages the sexual pleasure is the fruit of love. That sort of pleasure is unavailable to those who are in it only for the pleasure, and only for their own pleasure.”⁵

But lust doesn't hurt anyone, right?

Somehow this lie has managed to take root. Do we really think that the hyper-sexuality of our culture isn't hurting people? Have we not read the stories and statistics of how porn has destroyed lives, marriages, and families? Are we not seeing the impact on young girls?

Again I quote from DeYoung: “Lust's smoke can cause damage far and wide. A neighborhood feels threatened when a sex offender moves in, billboards and magazines expose children to explicit sexual content, teens having premarital sex early put pressure on their peers and struggle with depression, cohabiting young adults impair their chances of stable marriages later (with all the social difficulties broken marriages often bring), sexual abuse and affairs can rip families, churches, and communities apart. We often live with lust's collateral damage for the long term.”⁶

Can we be pure? Is there any hope?

We cannot be pure. Not by our own doing. It's impossible. Even if you were outwardly pure for your entire life, your inner thoughts, fantasies, and even dreams would all condemn you. So the answer to lust isn't more and better programs on abstinence. Nor is it more sex education in our schools and at home. The answer is a Person—Jesus Christ. The remedy to lust is confessing it to Jesus and receiving His perfect purity.

When you keep lust private, it will always win. We need the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ and we need the support and accountability of brothers and sisters in Christ. We need the reminder of our Baptism every day—being washed clean in Jesus every morning. We need the Lord's Supper. We need spiritual advisors—be they a pastor or another experienced Christian. Most of all, we need God's Word—“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” Psalm 51:10

What is the proper place of sex?

The church and the culture are giving a mixed message about sex. Sometimes we're told sex is no big deal at all—it's just for fun. Other times we're told that sex is *everything* between two people. What is it really? We need to have sex in its proper place, which is husband and wife giving their love to one

another and husband and wife giving new life to a child. Nothing more than that and nothing less than that.

What are ways to combat lust?

Something that surprised me about lust is that we may very well give *too much* attention to it. Dorothy Sayers says that when a culture is “spiritually depressed”, people turn to sexual pleasure because “they have nothing better to do.” We can gripe and complain all day long about the sexual depravity of a culture, but that’s most likely only a symptom of a much deeper problem. Lust is almost always pictured as the tallest branch in the tree of vices. It grows out of all the others. So if you focus on the others and cut down some of those lower branches, you’ll probably get rid of lust too. Here’s how C. S. Lewis says it:

“The sins of the flesh are bad, but they are the least bad of all sins. All the worst sins are spiritual...For there are two things inside me, competing with the human self which I must try to become. They are the Animal self, and the Diabolical self. The Diabolical self is worse.”⁷

So set your sights on your pride and you will very likely cure your lust.

Secondly, to combat lust we must replace its false pleasure with the true pleasures and joys of God. Think of driving out a nail with another nail.⁸ Good and healthy desires must replace lustful ones. As many people know, our brains reward us with dopamine when we experience good activities like eating good food or enjoying the intimacy of those we love. Lust hijacks those dopamine activities and ruins us with them. Combatting lust will include finding pleasure again in the good, right, and beautiful things of life that God gives to us.⁹

Thirdly, we should know that lust begins in our thoughts. To beat lust is to take control of your thoughts.¹⁰ “Take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). The lustful thoughts themselves are not the problem as much as what we do with the thoughts. There are many ways that Christians can attack lust right at the thoughts and before the sexual impulses take over.

Finally, we should not overlook the simplest of defense strategies such as not hanging out with members of the opposite sex in situations where we will be weak, putting internet filters on all our computers and devices, not giving cell phones to children at a young age without extreme supervision, not watching explicit movies and shows, not telling lewd jokes, etc.

What about pornography?

If you or anyone you know is viewing pornography, you must know that it cannot be cured alone. It is an epidemic in our culture. The future marriages and families of our children and grandchildren are at stake. Please get help. There are twelve step programs for sexual addiction. And I am available for private confession and absolution along with other pastoral care.

A Point to Ponder:

Is sex for personal pleasure? No, not according to God. It is about giving love to your husband and wife and giving life to a child. This is a quote from William Willimon for you to ponder.

“Perhaps we Christians overlook how countercultural it is for the church to assert that all of life, even our sexual life, is to be lived for the glory of God and the good of the neighbor. In losing the

sense that our lives are created and owned by God, we have lost any real sense of vocation, any real awareness of our lives being claimed and commandeered by God for any good outside our lives. For Christians to say that the proper, ultimate end of sexuality is children rather than momentary personal pleasure is a radical, subversive claim against the culture of hedonistic nihilism. All Good sex, for Christians, is meant to be public rather than private—that is, it is meant to be judged by its contribution to the good of the larger society.”¹¹

Bible Verses:

Matthew 5:27-28

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Ephesians 5:3

But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints.

1 Thessalonians 4:3-8

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; 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. 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 to you.

David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11-12)

Shechem and Dinah (Genesis 34) – Shechem lusts after Jacob’s daughter Dinah, rapes her, and then demands that he have her for a wife.

Amnon and Tamar (2 Samuel 13) – David’s son, Amnon, lusts after his sister, Tamar.

¹ DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies*. Brazos, 2009, p. 166.

² Willimon, William H. *Sinning Like a Christian: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins*. Abingdon, 2005, p. 131.

³ Quoted in DeYoung, p. 162.

⁴ DeYoung, p. 162-164.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 170-171.

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, quoted in Willimon, p. 132.

⁸ Okholm, Dennis. *Dangerous Passions, Deadly Sins: Learning from the Psychology of Ancient Monks*. Brazos, 2014. p. 46.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹¹ Willimon, p. 142.