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Lust – Smoke, Fire and Ashes  
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Matthew 5:27-32,  
2 Samuel 11:1-11

This is the final sermon on the seven deadly sins and preparing it took me back to a quote by Fyodor Dostoyevsky in his remarkable novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. He wrote, “Do you think it is a vain hope that one day man will find joy in noble deeds of light and mercy, rather than in the coarse pleasures he indulges in today—gluttony, fornication, ostentation, boasting, and envious vying with his neighbor? I am certain this is not a vain hope and that the day will come soon.” I hope and pray that day comes sooner rather than later.

Today we’re reflecting on lust, adultery and divorce. These are painful topics for some of us because of our own experiences or because of what we’re going through right now. While it may be difficult for some of us to hear, I pray that it may be helpful.

In *Matthew 5:27-32*, Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ **But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman for the purpose of lusting after her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.** If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members 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 of your members than for your whole body to go into hell. It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus repeatedly refers to the Ten Commandments. He says, “You shall not commit adultery,” and people probably thought, “I’ve heard that commandment since I was a kid.” What they hadn’t heard was what Jesus said next, “But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman for the purpose of lusting after her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” That’s when folks turned to one another and said, “I’m in trouble.”

Jesus’ point is that just because you don’t commit adultery with a certain person, doesn’t mean your relationship with that person in the area of sexuality is as it should be or that you yourself are what you ought to be. Our heart can be far from the kingdom of God in this regard, even if we’ve never committed adultery. In the Hebrew Bible, adultery had a precise definition: sexual relations between a married or engaged woman and any man other than her husband. Adultery, therefore, was committed only against the husband, never against the wife. It was considered a grievous transgression (*Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18; Leviticus 18:20*) to be punished by the death of both persons involved (*Deuteronomy 22:22-24*). The threat of execution still apparently existed into the first century as we see *John 7:53-8:11*.

The law was probably intended to ensure that any child born to the wife was the husband’s child. In the *Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus broadens the definition of adultery saying that a

husband could be held responsible for committing adultery against his wife (*Matthew 5:32; Luke 16:18*). In Israel at the time of Moses, a wife was viewed as property belonging to her husband. This is reflected in the tenth commandment about not coveting anything that belongs to your neighbor's household beginning with his wife. The Hebrew verb for "covet" implies intentional planning to obtain something for oneself. As we heard in the story of David and Bathsheba, the smoke of lust often leads to a destructive fire that leaves lives and relationships in ashes.

The vice of lust reduces sexual desire to selfishness as with King David and many others who have followed a similar path. Sexual desire and the sexual acts that express it appropriately are meant to serve life and be a sign of self-giving love. Lust, on the other hand, expresses disrespect for others and generates shame for ourselves. Lust contributes greatly to the sin of human trafficking, which entraps untold numbers of vulnerable victims, many of them minors. Lust promises pleasure long enough to get us hooked, which gives it power. But in the end, the habit of lust hinders our ability to love and be loved.

What Jesus is prohibiting in *Matthew 5:28* is not just forming a plan for seducing your neighbor's wife, or husband, but the mental act of lusting after her or him in the first place. Just as anger is the root that leads to murder, lust can lead to adultery. It's important to understand, it's not a sin for us to notice another person, but it's what we do next. Jesus warns against looking at a woman "for the purpose of lusting after her." In the early church women were to be welcomed as sisters. Paul wrote to Timothy (*1 Timothy 4:2*) that he was to speak "**to older women as mothers, to younger women as sisters – with absolute purity.**" In our time, this need for self-discipline and purity is a part of every believer's life.

Because we live in the age of the Internet, movies and television, we have far easier access to temptation regarding our sexual behavior than people in the past. When I was becoming a teenager the raciest show on television was Charlie's Angels. Now, that show would look quaint compared to programs that are broadcast today. Sex is also used to sell virtually every product under the sun from alcohol to cars to personal care products you name it. Temptation is everywhere. There's an excellent description of how we fall into sexual temptation in ***Job 31:1, 5, 7, 9, 11-12 (NIV)***, where Job shares how he maintained his integrity. He says, "I made a covenant with **my eyes not to look** lustfully at a young woman. If I have **walked with falsehood or my foot has hurried** after deceit— if **my steps** have turned from the path, if **my heart has been led by my eyes**, or if **my hands** have been defiled. If **my heart** has been enticed by a woman, or if I have **lurked** at my neighbor's door, that would have been wicked, a sin to be judged. It is a fire that burns to Destruction." Job accurately describes how adultery or other inappropriate sexual relationships begins with the lust of our eyes, moves to our heart and mind, then finally to action. Nothing "just happens" in this area of our lives. It happens because we look for it, we're open to it, we fantasize and think about it, and we try to make an opportunity happen or when the opportunity presents itself, rather than resisting it in our integrity, we welcome it in our weakness.

To be right sexually before God is to be like Job. Job did not let his eyes, heart, mind, or body dwell on or engage in practices he knew would cost him his integrity before God, his family or his community and lead to pain, heartache, strife, and sin. Unfortunately, millions of people including the many of the richest and most powerful do not have Job's integrity or moral strength. Human Trafficking and Pornography are huge industries. Pornography alone is now a multi-billion-dollar-a-year industry and an epidemic in our country damaging lives, destroying marriages, and distorting young people's views of healthy relationships. The rise of the Internet has made pornography pervasive and easily accessible in the privacy of one's own home. Craig Gross and Mike Fisher, Christians who began the ministry [www.XXXChurch.com](http://www.XXXChurch.com) say there are three levels that they find folks in: the Targeted – those who get spam email from the porn industry, the Tempted – those who struggle and find themselves looking now and then, and those in the Trenches who are addicted to porn and it's ruining their life, their intimacy with their spouse or their ability to have healthy relationships.

A person can move through these levels quickly and often folks wait to get help until it is too late, and damage has been done. The lie people tell themselves is that what they're doing isn't hurting anyone else, but it's hurting you, and your current or future relationships. You're doing damage to your soul. Then there are the people who are involved in the industry. The church needs to be a safe place for folks to talk about issues like this one. We're a congregation filled with moral failures, just in different areas of our lives. We all need the grace and forgiveness of Christ and we need to get on the path to holiness and respect. For those who are dealing with this issue, I recommend going to [www.XXXChurch.com](http://www.XXXChurch.com) and looking at some of the resources and helps they have including free software that you can download to help hold yourself accountable with others who are close to you. For those of you who'd rather read, you may want to see Steve Gallagher's book *At the Altar of Sexual Idolatry*.

There's a story of two Buddhist monks who were walking to their monastery and were caught in a drenching thunderstorm. They came to a stream swollen beyond its banks. Standing there was a beautiful woman wanting to get across. One of the monks asked, "Can I help you?" The woman said, "I need to cross the stream." The monk picked her up and carried her across and placed her safely on the other side. He and his companion continued to the monastery. That night his companion came to his room and said, "As monks we are not to look at a woman or to touch a woman, and you did both!" The first monk said, "I left her there at the stream, are you still carrying her?"

In *Proverbs 6*, there is one of many warnings about the importance of following the commandments and the danger of lust that leads to adultery. It says one purpose of wise teaching and discipline is (*Proverbs 6:24-25, 26b-27 NIV*), "keeping you from your neighbor's wife, from the smooth talk of a wayward woman. Do not lust in your heart after her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes...another man's wife preys on your very life. Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned?" The advertising campaign is wrong, what happens in Vegas doesn't stay in Vegas, it impacts our body, our soul and our relationships. How much wiser it is not to "go to Vegas" at all. When Jesus says if your eye

causes you to sin, pull it out and throw it away, if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away, he's exaggerating to make the point that we could cut off every part of our body with which we can sin, and still have a sinful heart. If you dismember your body to the point where you could never murder or even look hatefully at another, never commit adultery or even look to lust, your heart could still be full of anger, contempt, and obsessive desire for what is wrong. Jesus says in *Mark 7:21-23*, "For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

It's important to understand, especially for young people and single people, "that sexual desire is not wrong as a natural, uncultivated response, any more than anger is or pain." It's not wrong to notice someone is attractive. We all have thoughts that are influenced by what we see, which is why we need to be careful about what images we expose ourselves to on our computer or television. This goes back to what we talked about with Job, it's one thing to notice a person is attractive, it's something very different to plot how we can be with them or use them versus seeking to truly get to know them as persons.

Lust thrives in privacy and isolation, and people who struggle with lust often feel shame, which motivates them to keep their struggles hidden from others. But when we hide our sin and deny it, we can't confess it or deal with it **so the remedy for lust includes community, openness and accountability**. Sheer individual willpower doesn't work. The question we can ask ourselves is "How can my life—my thoughts, my choices, my emotional responses, my conversation, and my behavior—make me a person who is prepared to give and receive love appropriately in relationship with others?"

The best advice for resisting lust is not to get an Internet filter, although that can be a helpful resource, **but to have good friends**. If we have genuine friendships in which we learn to give and receive love in a healthy and satisfying way, we'll be less inclined to wander off looking for sham substitutes and quick fixes. Good friendships teach us how to respect one another, to offer appropriate physical affection, to appreciate and care for others without looking for something in return, to trust one another. Someone who knows what real love looks like, whether in a sexual relationship or not, is a person who is less tempted to find lust a tempting option. If your relationships with others and with God adequately feed your need to love and be loved, you'll see through and dismiss what lust has to offer.

Talking about issues such as lust, pornography, adultery, and divorce, we recognize how much we all need the forgiveness of God and how much we need to do our part in becoming followers of Christ whose eyes, lives, and choices reflect what Jesus would do if he were living our life. Part of being in the kingdom of God is learning how to treat people with purity and respect as sisters and brothers in Christ. When some men brought a woman to Jesus who had been caught in the very act of adultery (why someone was watching and why they didn't bring the man raises other questions), they all had stones in their hands ready to kill her.

Jesus told them to let the one who was without sin throw the first stone, and they went away beginning with the oldest.

The truth is we're all sinners who have fallen short of the glory and desire of God. We need to put down the stones and stop looking for others whose sins are different than ours or "worse" in our eyes. It's far more beneficial, important and appropriate to work on yourself and the areas that you need the Holy Spirit to help you overcome. Remember, the Lord is far more concerned with where we're going, than where we've been.

**Blessing:** *2 Peter 1:3-8*, "His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."

### **Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. One of today's scriptures is the story of David and Bathsheba (*2 Samuel 11:1-11*). David was a rich and powerful king, loved by the Lord and the people. How do you explain his wanting and taking Bathsheba? What typical elements of lust do you see? What commandments did David ultimately break because of his lust? Review the harmful effects of his adultery on himself and on all the others in the story. This story happened thousands of years ago yet it's strikingly contemporary and powerfully instructive. What can we—who live in a culture whose god is sex—take to heart from this ancient story?
2. We are all bombarded with the wrong images of sex from TV, movies, the internet, entertainers, classmates, coworkers, and peers. Share some of your struggles with sexual formation and learning the difference between love and lust in such an environment. Can you think of any positive images of sex in our culture? How can we form our desires in healthy and holy ways?
3. Where have you experienced being God's beloved and how have you found love free of shame in your relationship with your Creator? Who has given you a picture of this kind of loving communion?
4. Discuss: How can my life, my thoughts, my choices, my emotional responses, my conversation, and my behavior make me a person who is best prepared to give and receive love in relationship with others?
5. What can you do to show respect for others and their bodies? How can your ordinary, daily gestures, jokes, language, and touch be a witness to the respect due to other human

beings? How can touching a person appropriately make a personal, deeply human connection? How can touch be used to express and serve love rather than lust?

6. Think back over the seven deadly sins rooted in pride we've discussed: vainglory, envy, wrath, gluttony, sloth, greed, lust. Which of these do you struggle with most? Think quietly about this for a few moments. Then have someone read *2 Peter 1:3-8*. Give thanks that God has given you "everything we need for a godly life," and name these things from the passage and ask God specifically for the virtues described in this passage and pray for one another.

Living it Out: Find a trusted friend who can serve as an accountability partner—someone safe and loving who can encourage you when you are tempted and mess up, someone who assures you of the deep love of God, someone with whom you feel comfortable confessing shame and hurt, someone who can prompt you to grow closer in your relationship with God. Meet or talk on the phone as often as you need to keep vigilant about the effects of lust on your heart and its collateral damage in the lives of others.