

Getting Serious About Lust in an Age of Smirks

by Tim Stafford

Lust is hard to speak about seriously in our era. When Jimmy Carter, running for President, told an interviewer that he had often committed adultery in his heart, the reaction in the press was what John Updike described as “nervous hilarity.” “How strangely on modern ears,” continues Updike, “falls the notion that lust—sexual desire that wells up in us as involuntarily as saliva—in itself is wicked!”

Our modern way of handling lust is to pretend that it has no hold on us—to see it as inevitable and healthy, even fun. Is it really so? We don’t have to look hard to see that lust is not nearly as frivolous as our society would like to believe.

In the first place we don’t experience it as frivolous. Let even the most mature adults get tangled in the foolishness of lust—channel-surfing for TV sex in a motel room or plotting the next meeting with someone they want to devour mentally—and they find themselves in a helpless, robotic daze. They may try to joke about it, but the lightheartedness is an act. Lust may be thrilling—like an encounter with a shark is thrilling—but it is not a laugh.

Our society is not finding lust such a laugh either. While it is hard to trace a direct connection between *Playboy* and modern social disintegration, our infatuation with lust surely has something to do with the spread of AIDS, teenage pregnancy, and divorce.

The Bible treats lust as deadly serious. Our Lord says that lust is tantamount to adultery. For Christians that should settle it.

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But it is not only because of Scripture that we take lust seriously. Scripture is underlined by experience.

What Lust Is

I have spent much of the past twenty years talking and writing about sex, and I know from experience that a contingent of Christian parents and pastors would rather never mention it. When they speak of battling lust, they really mean eliminating all thoughts of sex. Essentially, they would rather teenagers never enter puberty.

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The Bible, however, is frank and unsqueamish about sex. Sex is not really that big a topic in Scripture, and the Bible’s concern with lust is only partly about sexual lust. In English the word *lust* generally connotes lurid sexual fantasies. It is closely associated with the mental pictures of naked bodies to which males are so typically drawn.

This English meaning of *lust*, however has no equivalent word in New Testament Greek. The word translated *lust* in Matthew 5:28 (*epithumia*) means simply *desire*. On occasion the word, in fact, has a positive meaning as when Jesus tells his disciples that He has “desired with desire” (as the King James puts it) to eat the Passover meal with them (Luke 22:15). Clearly, Jesus does not mean that He has fantasized about the Passover meal, mentally drooling over the menu. *Epithumia* is not a sensual fantasy. Jesus means that He has deeply longed for the occasion.

The same Greek word is used to render the Hebrew word translated *covet* as in, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor” (Exodus 20:17, NIV). Here we strike at the heart of the problem of lust as the Bible

conceives it: We want things that don't belong to us. Leave sex out of it entirely for the moment. We are not content with what we have. We want something more—and that desire drives us.

Lust, or covetousness, is a basic component of what the Bible calls sin. All two-year-olds, and all truthful forty-year-olds, confess it: I want what I want because I want it. Nobody and nothing else figures. Jesus's comments on sexual lust fit into that. Lust shows that, in your heart of hearts, you want somebody else's sexual

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life. When a man lusts for a woman, he is not grateful for what God has given him. He is making himself sick thinking about what he *wishes* God would give him.

The psychology of lust is a simple process: It begins with attraction; it turns quickly to dissatisfaction; it results in fixation. It leaves us ungrateful, discontented, and obsessive. When you are filled with lust—for it does indeed seem to fill you—you can have nothing in your mind but that appetite for what you lack. This is true not just of sex.

The "flesh"—that is, our lives without God—urgently desires many things. It wants power. It wants pleasure. It wants wealth. It wants status and admiration. None of these is wrong in itself. And nothing would be wrong with liking these things. But desire, or lust, is more than liking. It is the will to possess. Lust turns good things into objects of worship.

And that is why lust, or covetousness, is so closely linked to another biblical word: *idolatry*. What we lust for we worship. We may joke about our lusts, but our behavior shows a more fundamental allegiance. We look to our idols to give us what we need—to make our lives rich and purposeful. In our culture an idol many people look to is the god of sexual fulfillment.

The Right to Desire

Look at the magazine covers in the grocery store check-out line, and you will be reminded of how crazy the biblical view sounds to modern people. The ordinary North American takes it as a given that people want things that are not theirs. Naturally a man envies his neighbor's new car. Of course a woman looks at Paul Newman and thinks how good he would be in bed. What is wrong with wanting it—so long as you don't commit a crime to get it?

In fact, we have come perilously close to embracing lust as a fundamental human characteristic—if not a right. Most discussion of homosexuality assumes this: people have a deep, helpless sexual desire for a certain kind of partner, they argue; therefore, it would be cruel and inhuman to deny them the freedom to fulfill that desire.

And deep, helpless desires are not confined to homosexuality. Nearly all desire seems deep and uncontrollable. I am not aware of choosing to desire what I desire. The Bible may tell me not to covet my neighbor's wife or house; but I don't seem to have a choice about it. I see it; I want it. I can take a cold shower, avert my eyes, avoid a second glance, even undergo psychotherapy—but in a world full of beautiful things, my desires cannot be done away with easily. They keep welling up.

Still, the Bible tells me, "You shall not covet." Jesus says, in the context of sexual lust, that if my eye causes me to sin, I should pluck it out (Matthew 5:29). Just because I can't help lust does not make it acceptable. Jesus is dedicated to bringing in another kingdom. To be His disciple, I must put lust to death. I must learn to want what He wants for me and to put away everything else.

Replacing Desire with Desire

As a boy raised in church, I learned that lust is serious. With some encouragement from other Christians, I tried to stamp out lust in the most obvious way: through techniques of self-control. One strategy was systematically to comb my environment to remove all stimuli to lust (movies, magazines, bathing suits). Another technique was to comb my mind to root out every lustful thought (sexual images).

Anyone who has taken lust seriously can add to the list of self-control techniques. Cold showers, exercise, staying busy, scriptural mantras: all these have been tried to push lust down. Broadly speaking, they don't work. They may keep lust at bay for a time, but they certainly do not eliminate it. The human mind is so strong it can use any raw material for lusting. (Think of conservative Islam, compelled to cover even women's faces.) And trying to root out lustful thoughts can be as futile as trying not to think of pink elephants.

Interestingly enough, I found none of these techniques in the Bible. Clearly, in the New Testament, they come in second to an utterly different form of salvation.

"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ," the apostle Paul wrote the Colossians, "set your hearts on things above....Set your minds on things above." Only then does he continue, "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry"

(3:1-5, NIV).

First things first: think on things above. Salvation is offered in Jesus—in His life, death, and resurrection. He forgives us for our lusts; He justifies us from our lusts; and He sends His Spirit to sanctify us from our lusts. Life in the Spirit transforms us. Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit, a result of the Spirit-filled life. Paul's promise to

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the Galatians is clear and optimistic, if maddeningly general: "Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature" (Galatians 5:16, NIV).

Walk by the Spirit? Our society is dedicated to exciting lust for commercial purposes. We are bathed daily in imaginary, electronic sexual stimulation. Against this the Sunday School advice to think pure thoughts seems feeble, almost naive.

Yet I believe Paul is thinking less of the moment of temptation than of the lifetime of spiritual warfare. Desires do not go away simply because we want them to. They do not generally disappear like a soap bubble when we pray. They do fade into the background, however, when a greater desire replaces them. Jesus taught us to pray for that desire: "Our Father in heaven, holy be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done."

So the Spirit operates, planting a desire for holiness

in our hearts, a righteous lust that grows up and puts all other desires in the shade. A "just-say-no" strategy alone is never sufficient for the long haul. Scripture encourages us to say yes—yes to the way of the Spirit.

Having been "buried" with Christ in our baptism, we are now "made alive" with Him by the Spirit. We therefore make our choices accordingly—to the point of becoming "slaves to one another" out of love (Galatians 5:13) rather than serving the self and its lusts.

When we walk by the Spirit—that is, live a full-hearted Christian life in prayer, worship, and service—we get on to better things. We apply self-control *because we desire what God desires for us*. We want something better, something given by God Himself. We desire life in Christ and all that He gives within that life.

This is the good kind of lust. A man and woman who desire the sexual life that *has* been given—sex with a marriage partner—shows God's work in their lives. Desiring your spouse is good. This is part of life in the Spirit—desiring what God gives.

Life in the Spirit is a difficult walk on a narrow path. The finest, most Spirit-filled and devoted Christians struggle with misdirected desire. They may even be tempted far more powerfully than others, for an evil power is always at work. They may make progress only in the sense that evil uses stronger and subtler means to tempt them. They may "graduate" from a lust for *Play-boy* to a lust for power. We do not have the techniques to eliminate sin, let alone temptation, from our lives. We will struggle with it until we see Jesus.

Yet we will see Jesus. And He is with us now—giving us greater desires.