

Lust

It may seem strange to conclude our series on the seven deadly sins with a discussion of lust. Lust is, after all, the only one of the seven deadly sins that modern people are quite eager to discuss. It is the subject of morning talk shows, television miniseries, endless movies and most contemporary advertising. The only question modern people would ask is whether it is really a deadly sin at all and not a virtue modern people should reasonably pursue.

To understand the teaching of the Scriptures on this matter, we need to begin by defining what the Bible means by “lust” and to compare and contrast this with what contemporary media culture assumes.

The media present “lust” as a fairly uncomplicated drive for sexual satisfaction which is normal and natural.

- Obviously, if something is normal and natural, there is no point in repressing it.
- The only question is how to pursue it by falling in with the right person at the right time.
- If things don’t work out as planned, well, hard luck, but one can always try again and, if one can’t hack it, there’s always therapy.

The position taken by the Scriptures is much more subtle.

- The Scriptures assume that some desires (including sexual desire) are indeed natural.
- These desires are part of a broader framework of lasting relationships, which order us toward God and toward one another in ways that allow us to
 - discover certain things we otherwise would not have discovered and
 - be changed in certain ways that are otherwise difficult to experience.
- At the same time, the fact that we have turned away from God and have turned in on ourselves makes us sick, unhealthy, even dangerous people.
 - Apart from God, our self is a sick self that lacks wisdom and insight.
 - Because of this sickness, when we are apart from God, many of our wants and loves are disordered and selfish and aim at short-term, selfish goals.
 - As a result our actions often neglect and destroy relationships; by trying to make more of ourselves, we end up making less of other people.
- When God comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ, he intends to do something more than just clear a few bad debts at the bank (forgive past sins); he aims also to show us his more powerful love and to heal both our minds and our desires.

- Our present life in Christ is the long outworking of this process, where old desires still retain some power while God is creating other desires and loves in us. The result is a struggle.

Defining "Lust"

The word the Scriptures used for "lust" is ἐπιθυμία (*epithumia*), which means literally "set one's heart upon a thing" and thus= a "desire" or "longing" for something.

- It is based on the root θυμός (*thumos*), which has the underlying idea of a quick, violent, reactive movement, so *epithumia* would mean a strong, forceful desire.
- *Epithumia* is most often used of a bodily desire, which anticipates some pleasure (gratification/satisfaction) that will be felt when gets or has what is desired.
- *Epithumia* hopes to get something one currently lacks.
 - Cf. Clement of Alexandria (fr. 46): "For to desire arises from lacking" something.
 - This is different from covetousness, which wants more of something more already has enough of.

Thus, if we were going to put together a definition for "lust" (as the Bible understands it), it might look something like this:

- Lust is
 - a strong desire to
 - pursue and
 - get for oneself
 - something that one currently lacks
 - so that one can enjoy it by oneself and for oneself.

This could include

- sexual desire outside of and apart from the bond of marriage
 - Cf. Mt. 5:28-29: "I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."
- or lust for wealth (and the power that is supposed to come with wealth)
 - Cf. Acts 20:33 and compare Mk. 4:19: "the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the lusts for other things come in and choke the word and make it unfruitful."

How Sin Twists Natural Desires into Disordered Desires

We have all kinds of desires, many of which are related to the body. Some are both good and necessary; some are sinful and destructive. How does one know the difference?

The truth is that both natural desires and disordered desires ultimately have the same origin. Bodily desires were given to us by God to help us find well-being in the world.

- If one had not eaten, one would start to feel a bodily desire for food (hunger).
- If one had had nothing to drink, one would begin to feel a bodily desire for water (thirst).
- If one has been working and is exhausted, one would feel a bodily desire for sleep (sleepiness).
- If something which is unjust and contrary to the order of God's creation occurs, we have a bodily desire for things to be set right (righteous anger).
- Sexual desire is of a similar character; it looks in love to union with the other person and takes pleasure in the other person, all in the context of a lifelong relationship that mirrors Christ's lasting, ongoing love for his people.
 - Cf. Eph. 5:25-29,32-33: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the Word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church...This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church...each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband."

Bodily desires arise from the way we were created to love ourselves and care for ourselves (and our love and care for our spouse is an extension of this):

- "Love your neighbor *as yourself*" (Mt. 19:19; 22:39, quoting Lev. 19:18).
- "After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he *feeds and cares for it...*" (Eph. 5:29).

When we left God and neglected God so that we could act in accordance with our own desires (cf. 2 Tim. 3:3; James 1:4), this sin (distorted self-love) twisted both our mind and our desires.

- We now often act impulsively, i.e. when we see in our mind pictures of what we want, we move to pursue it.
 - We agree (consent) to an action
 - because it will produce pleasure for oneself,
 - without waiting for our minds' judgment about whether the action is good or not,
 - taking little or no time to think through the consequences of one's actions.
 - We now see pleasure not in the broader context of a fully developed relationship, but as something to be pursued as an end in itself (even if this pursuit of pleasure causes our existing relationships to decline and fall apart).
 - Desire and pleasure become sinful at the point where
 - instead of seeing pleasure as something that points beyond itself to another person,
 - we downgrade the person and treat them as only a means to get the pleasure.
- Acting impulsively to pursue pleasure creates a gap between what we think or know to be right and what we end up doing.

(There is now a noticeable disconnect--knowledge no longer affects action.)

 - Rom. 7:15: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do."
- Rather than knowing leading to loving, our twisted loves now revise and reshape what we allow ourselves to see or know.
 - Eph. 4:22 "the desires which deceive" (patterns of self-deception we will not admit or see, but resist acknowledging)
- Sin increasingly rearranges the way that energy and focused attention are directed.
 - Energy directed toward God is sapped and wastes away, so that one is left with a shell of religious speaking and some religious activities (which are done without initiative, energy or enthusiasm, although one doesn't see this oneself and would even deny that anything has changed).

- Energy is reinvested in pursuing a particular kind of bodily desire (and the pleasure that is supposed to come with it), but so much energy and expectation is put on things that are not God that the desire turns out to be insatiable.
 - After an initial experience of pleasure, one always ends up feeling a lack and an emptiness and wanting more.
 - Consequently, one invests more time and uses more force or aggressiveness to get beyond the emptiness to the pleasure one is hoping to find.
 - James 4:1-2: “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your lusts that battle within you? You want something but you don’t get it. You kill or covet, but you cannot have what you want.”
 - Rom. 13:9-10: “The commandments, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not covet’ and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to its neighbor.”
- The more energy we pour into these desires, the more they drive us
 - taking over a greater part of our life and making us more fixated on the thing we desire and more tied to it.
 - “led about by desires” (2 Tim. 3:6)
 - “obey the desires” (Rom. 6:12)
 - “serve/be a slave to the desires” (Tit. 3:3)
 - making us more willing
 - to take what belongs to someone else (Ex. 20:14)
 - make other people less (reducing and degrading them) to get what we want
 - Our picture of them goes from 3-dimensional → 2-dimensional
 - Our empathy for them and our willingness to engage them as whole persons (people like ourselves) decreases.

The answer is not to try to exert more willpower, but rather to

- give up on our self-sufficiency and our will and
- turn to God and ask him for a better, purer love

“The only real escape from the demands of the flesh is to find something more than flesh to love... a higher love than the flesh, a love pure, understanding, redeeming...”

(Fulton Sheen, *The Seven Capital Sins*, p. 30,35)

