

For several chapters we've covered each of the seven deadly sins. We've called them the seven *daily* sins because of their prevalence in our lives. In this last chapter we cover a very controversial sin, and that is the sin of lust. Let's begin by reading 1 Thessalonians 4:2-8. The apostle Paul writes under the inspiration of the Spirit to the local community of believers:

For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. 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.

When we talk about the daily sin of lust, we have to understand that there are multiple voices out there—the voices of the experts and the shrinks and the doctors and even the voice in our own hearts. But if we profess Jesus Christ, we must understand that he is not only a friend and brother but a king. So we must believe in his commandments and take warning of his instructions regarding the sin of lust: Abstain from sexual immorality. In other words, learn how to control yourself, not in the passion of lust, but in holiness and honor.

Paul gives an illustration of what not to be: those who do not know God. He says that we should be viewing and pursuing and thinking about sex in a way that is different from the ways of those who do not know God, and the way that it is different is in holiness and honor instead of in the passion of lust.

If we are going to do these things, we need to define it, identify it, and then learn how to fight lust in our own lives.

Defining Lust

If you've read or listened to the whole series, you can take the lessons learned from earlier in the series and apply them to this, too. Lust is looking to sex for that which only God can provide. Lust is not necessarily "wanting a bad thing," but wanting a good thing *badly*. In our text, Paul doesn't say to refrain from sex entirely. He also doesn't say to pursue it unrestrained. Those polar opposites are what society says.

What the ancient philosophers say

The ancient Greeks and Plato taught that the soul was more valuable and holy than the body—that the body was dirty and so sex was a part of that. If you wanted to pursue God and holiness, you had to abstain from sex. Sex was seen as a "lesser" thing. This Greek philosophy traveled all the way into the Middle Ages when the monks would punish themselves for their desires. They even hid in the mountains from them. Later on in the Victorian era, it was taboo to see the ankle of a woman.

You see this all throughout the history of Western civilization and we even hear it in churches today when preachers stand up and say, "You better not have sex, you'll get an STD, or this or that, etc." They say all these things to make people feel horrible and rotten about their desires. That is not Christian; that is actually Greek philosophy trickling down from Plato and the Gnostics.

What the modern philosophers say

The Bible never says to refrain from or abstain from sex ultimately, nor does it say to practice and pursue it unrestrained. That would be the modern view of sex, largely thanks to the psychologist and philosopher Dr. Freud. Freud taught that the old, traditional Victorian, religious model of abstaining from sex was unhealthy. He taught that we shouldn't suppress our appetites. "If you're hungry, eat, and sex is just an appetite. Pursue it unrestrained."

Our society follows the thinking of Freud. No matter how many pornographic images they consume, they never get full, because they don't have a true view of sex. The Bible says to pursue and practice sex within two categories: holiness and honor. The Bible also says that the universe is a certain way. It does not become a certain way when we think it does; the universe just is a certain way based on the design of the

Designer. The center of the universe is God; it is not an opinion. While philosophers might say, “I think, therefore I am,” God, the reality, says, “I AM who I AM” (Exodus 3:14). He’s the center whether we like it or not.

In relation to God and others

Next in importance under “God” are “others.” That is communicated in the law of God, which is summarized in two commandments: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and strength” and “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27, Mark 12:30). If we use the first commandment as the lens through which we understand the rightful pursuit and practice of sex, we understand it as keeping God at the top and somberly considering his commandments and design for sex and marriage. If we use the second commandment about loving your neighbor as the second lens through which we see the rightful pursuit and practice of sex, then we see honor as keeping others right there in their place as well as keeping God in his place, at the top. Then, under God and others, comes your properly ordered desires for sex.

So, another way to describe lust is to say that lust is simply pursuing and practicing sex inordinately. It is grabbing that forbidden fruit, not for the pleasure of eating fruit, but to become like God. Lust is practicing sex in a way that is dishonoring to another or disregarding the holiness of God. Let’s consider 1 Thessalonians 4:4, where we will get our microscopes out and study some words.

Vessels of honor

First, we examine the word “body” from 1 Thessalonians 4:4. What does Paul mean by “body”? If you read from the KJV, it is translated as “vessel.” The metaphor here is beautiful. Paul is talking about a vessel. A vessel is a cup or a bowl, that which delivers to your lips the pleasure of food. It’s the container for the pleasure. According to 1 Thessalonians 4:4, we are to control our vessel in a way that is honoring. In Romans 9:21, Paul says that there are vessels for honor and vessels for dishonor, and 2 Timothy 2:20 says something similar. When these letters were written, they didn’t have indoor plumbing; they had chamber pots. A chamber pot is obviously a vessel meant for dishonor. It is meant to be discarded.

A vessel meant for honor, on the other hand, is a king’s chalice. It’s bejeweled and thoroughly polished and only meant for the lips of the

king. Paul says to treat your vessel with honor. What is fascinating about this is that we do not exactly know what he means by “vessel.” The RSV translates vessel as “wife.” 1 Peter 3:7 says to show “honor to the woman as the weaker vessel.” So, piecing together the RSV, KJV, and ESV translations, Paul is saying, “Control your own wife with honor,” like a king’s chalice.

The ESV translates it “body” because Paul also says that our body is an earthen vessel in which our soul is contained (2 Cor. 4:7). Is he referring to the wives of the husbands in the church or is he referring to their bodies? John Piper says that if you translate it as “body” it makes no sense. Doug Wilson says the same thing, and many other scholars say that the “body” translation makes the verse nonsensical. In verse 6 the sin he is referring to is a transgression against a brother or sister in Christ. So in this discussion we will say that “vessel” is the more correct translation, and that the wife is a vessel fit for honor. The man who wishes to be married should treat his wife as an honorable vessel, cherishing her.

Sometimes the church makes too much out of the sin of lust. The sin that takes down more pastors is not lust; it is actually greed that takes down pastors more than any other sin. On the other hand, in church history, lust was often saved for last. But if lust is brought into a marriage, it is deadly. The Bible says that there are many things that are lawful inside of marriage. “All things are lawful,” and we should practice them in holiness. But not all things edify (1 Cor. 10:23).

In 1 Corinthians 6:12, Paul says that he will not be a slave of anything. And if you are a slave to sex—if you need it and it makes you feel special when God is supposed to be in that place of making you feel special, and you bring that slavery into your marriage, you will crush your spouse under the expectations that can only be fulfilled by God. And you will crush yourself in the most vulnerable place of all.

Exceeding the limits

Imagine those country bridges that have signs in front saying, “No trucks.” No 18-wheelers are supposed to drive over those bridges. But if a truck continually disregards the weight limits of that bridge week in and week out, the bridge will eventually crumble into the bayou and so will the truck. In the same way, marriages can only handle so much pressure. If you bring your infinite wants and needs that can only be satisfied by God and put them on your spouse, you will exceed the weight limit of

what your marriage, your spouse, and sex are designed for, and you will crack them and eventually crush them.

Now let's examine the word "honor" in verse 6, which says that the sin it's regarding is a transgression against a brother or sister in Christ. So "honor" here is not a vertical sin against God but horizontal, referring to the way you treat your vessel—your spouse. Honor refers to how you treat the other person. Therefore, lust is pursuing and practicing sex in a way that dishonors the other person. So what does it mean to honor?

It's a vague word. What does it mean to honor your father and your mother when you're 3? Does it mean to obey them? Yes. What about when you're 33 or 55? No. Honor is one of those things that has to be applied. When you're little, honor means obey. When you're an adult, honor doesn't necessarily mean obey; it means different things. It might mean taking care of your parents financially.

Honor is one of those things you'd better think deeply about. Get together with your husband or wife and ask, "What does it mean to honor you? What are the practices and pursuits that honor you and treat you as a dignified person created in the image of God?" Get together in your accountability groups and community groups and find out what it means to honor in the dating relationship and in the engagement relationship. What does it mean when you've been married for 20, 30, or 40 years?

The lustful fool asks, "Where's the line at which I cross into sin? What exactly is the weight limit?" The wise asks, not "Where is the line of sin," but "How do I honor and treat a brother or sister in Christ with dignity?" There are more categories than right and wrong. "All things are lawful, but not all things are wise" (1 Cor. 6:12).

Sex with holiness

The next word we're going to look at is "holiness." Holiness is referring to your attitude about God in your pursuit and practice of sex. Paul says, "If you disregard these things, you disregard not man but God" (1 Thess. 4:8). So, lust is the practice and pursuit of sex that disregards the holiness of God, his character, and his commandments. So we have to consider what it means to practice and pursue sex in holiness specifically as a church, as couples, and as individuals.

What does it mean for a single? What does it mean in marriage? The one thing we shouldn't be asking is, "Where is the line at which it becomes sin?" It's much deeper than that. We are dealing with things that are in the essence of our humanity. We're humans; we don't want to be

animals. We want to reach the pinnacle of all that God has designed for humanity. A question about crossing the line is a question for fools. We're dealing with something beautiful and deadly, like fire. It would be foolish to ask how much you can play with it before you get burned.

If lust is the *practice* and *pursuit* of sex that disregards the holiness of God and dishonors other people, are we not in sin as long as we don't *practice* it and *pursue* it? Certainly not. We now add to the definition of lust. Jesus says in Matthew 5:28 that if you look with lust in your heart, you are guilty of adultery. It is not only the practice and pursuit of sex that matters, it's the thoughts, the expectations, and desires.

Then Paul gives a very neat illustration. He tells the church not to carry themselves like those who do not know God. I imagine that when the Thessalonian church read this part of the letter, lightbulbs went off. They would have known exactly what he was referring to. To live the wise, Christian life, we don't just read our Bible. We have to read our society as well. At that point, the Thessalonians' minds are supposed to leave the words on the page and remember what they've "read" about the society around them too. And they've "read" about the Gentiles who do not know God. They've seen them living their lives, and they know how they are not supposed to live, as "the Gentiles who do not know God."

In the passion of lust

A Gentile embroiled in the passion of lust

Genesis 39 depicts a Gentile who does not know God and is embroiled in the passion of lust. She is the wife of Potiphar. We can learn what the opposite of honor and regard for God's holiness is from her. Joseph, a Hebrew sold into captivity by his brothers, eventually ended up in the household of a very wealthy citizen named Potiphar. Eventually Joseph becomes the "COO" of the entire estate because Potiphar trusted and loved him. Joseph was not only savvy and hard-working, he was good-looking. Potiphar's wife noticed; she "cast her eyes on Joseph" (Genesis 39:7). And then she noticed and noticed again. For weeks and months she kept on noticing Joseph. Then she commanded him to lie with her. In a roundabout way, he said no.

There is no lust in just noticing someone who is attractive. Her sin was the "look *after* the look." This was Potiphar's wife going to bed with Joseph in her mind. Notice in her sin how she treats Joseph: Is Joseph a

person that she appreciates and sees the reflection of God in? No, Joseph is an object meant to be used and abused by her. See here that lust is not just a male problem. When Joseph says no, because she is “*his* wife,” (verse 9) he means that she is Potiphar’s and not Joseph’s. Joseph is regarding the holiness of God by regarding God’s design for marriage and sex. God has designed sex to be inside of marriage, and that is exactly why Joseph says, “But you’re Potiphar’s wife.”

All major religions on the entire planet for all of time have seen sex outside of marriage as wrong. Only in a tiny little bubble of time, from about the 60s to today, and only on one side of the planet, do people believe that they can throw off the yoke of marriage established as an institution from the very beginning of creation. “We’re just evolved apes. If you’re hungry, eat!” they say.

If you want to act like an animal and see sex in marriage as simply a contrivance of religion, consider that animals do not read *The Purpose Driven Life*. Animals do not contemplate the mysteries of the universe. They are not concerned about who made them or where they came from or where they’re going in life. If and when a society throws off the dignity and holiness of God and no longer regards sex within the purposes of marriage, they will also begin to throw off everything else that comes with keeping God at the center. They will begin to lose beauty, goodness, and purpose of life. As they say, you can’t have your cake and eat it, too.

Joseph understood that sex was designed inside of marriage. He knew that sex is a metaphor. God is a profound preacher and he not only speaks in metaphor and illustration, he creates entire institutions in nature to be the metaphors and illustrations. Joseph heard the stories of Genesis 2 and knew that God established sex and marriage as an illustration, or a foreshadowing, of someone to come. Sex does not only illustrate Christ’s relationship with the Church; it also illustrates communion between two souls.

The Bible says that “Two shall become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24, Matthew 19:5, Mark 10:8, 1 Corinthians 6:16, Ephesians 5:31). Two don’t *literally* become one flesh; we don’t become two-headed monsters and share DNA. The phrase is a physical metaphor indicating a spiritual reality inside of marriage. When you get married, you promise the other, “I am for you and you are for me.” You share not only the same bank account and house, but the same bed and the same life.

Sex is just the physical symbol of all that is true spiritually, emotionally, and relationally. The spiritual reality of two humans created in the image of God becoming one is symbolized in the ritual of sex.

Joseph knew that. He said to Potiphar's wife, "We can't lie with each other. We're not married. It would be a lie. It would be out of order with the order of the universe. It would be disastrous. It would begin to break apart our world and separate our bodies and souls. To do physically that which is not true spiritually, emotionally, and relationally would be destructive to everything and everyone around us. No."

But Potiphar's wife had no regard for the holiness of God or his designs because as a Gentile she did not know God. And in verse 13 we see that she responded to Joseph's rejection by using his coat, which he left behind as he fled her advances, to hatch a plot to have Joseph executed. Fortunately, Potiphar liked Joseph, so instead of executing him, he threw him into jail. But notice that when his wife didn't get to use Joseph, she abused Joseph.

Because lust produces no love, she did not love or honor Joseph at all. You cannot disregard the holiness of God without simultaneously dishonoring other people. She intended to have Joseph sexually but no other way. Sex outside of marriage is a charade. In marriage you say, "I belong to you. I commit to you. If you fall, I fall. If you rise, I rise." But sex outside of marriage says, "I want your body, but I don't want to belong to you. I don't want any commitment or promise. I just want to use you as a vessel to bring pleasure to myself." It is a practice of mutual usury and exploitation and hate. It is not born of the love of God and is not true love.

A Christian embroiled in the passion of lust

We now move from Potiphar's wife to another person embroiled in the sin of lust, because it is not only Gentiles who do not know God who can be caught by the sin of lust. So we turn to Psalm 51, a journal entry written by a Christian caught up in the spiral of lust. Some of you might say, "I know God, and I've fallen into lust, and I want to know if there's any hope for me." There is.

David, who wrote Psalm 51, stood on his rooftop, cast his eyes on Bathsheba, and began a spiral of lust and murder, just like Potiphar's wife did. David wrote Psalm 51 just after the prophet Nathan confronted him with his sin. Maybe just happened to you. You might have just realized your sin and now are wondering how to respond. Can you identify with verse 2, which says, "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin"? David says, "Create in me a clean heart" (verse 10). Wash, clean, and cleanse are words we use in laundry services. The sin of

lust leads to internal feelings of shame. Christian or not Christian, you are operating outside of the boundaries of God's universe. You're putting water in the gas tank and trying to take a bath in mud. The sin of lust will always lead to brokenness.

In verse 3, David writes, "My sin is ever before me." He's meditating on how he failed God. Down in verse 8, he says, "Let me hear joy and gladness." When you are trapped in the sin of lust, you begin to feel isolated from community. You can no longer sing along and smile. You feel as though each and every one of them, God included, is handling you with rubber gloves.

Hope can be found in verse 1. David says, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love." He doesn't appeal to his mercy according to the fact that he deserves it, or the fact that he has rights, or that "that other person" is also guilty, or because he was set up. He's no longer blame-shifting or making any claims that God owes him anything at all. Instead, he appeals to God's steadfast love. He is going to God after having sinned egregiously. The sinner's only plea is God's steadfast love.

David reminds himself in verse 1 that God is a God who "stands fast" with his children, who has covenanted with them, who never gives up or forsakes them. He acknowledges that he doesn't deserve anything but that God is merciful. When you have been confronted by your sin of lust, this is how you respond and confess. Appeal to God's "abundant mercy" seen in verse 1. David admits he's been slain by the deadly sin of lust and is now throwing himself at God's mercy and love. God is his only hope. He is the good news. That is the confession that frees us from the guilt and shame and dirtiness and loneliness of lust.

The concept of "abundant mercy" is also shown in Joseph's story. Many years after Joseph's brothers threw him into the pit and sold him into slavery, they meet again; this time Joseph has the power to destroy them. Instead of repaying them, though, he weeps out of love and longing for his brothers and has abundant mercy on them (Genesis 43-45).

Fighting Lust

You might ask, how can God, who is a just and holy judge, simply sweep sins under the rug and treat you like a beloved child and not a hated prisoner. David asks God to "Blot out my transgressions" in Psalm 51:1. "Blotting out" is another laundering phrase, and it's also mentioned in another part of the Bible, in the book of Genesis, when Moses comes down off the mountain and finds the people worshipping the golden calf, a

false god. They are dirty now, contaminated by their idolatry and adultery towards God. Rightfully so, God wants to blot them out. Exodus 32:6 says, “the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.” This is a Hebrew idiom for gluttony, drunkenness, and sexual orgies (ref?). That’s what was going on down at the foot of Mount Sinai in the Christian community, and God wanted to blot them all out for their idolatry (Exodus 32:33). Does this sound harsh? They deserved it.

But Moses, as a foreshadow of Christ, interceded. He said, “Please blot me out of your book” (Exodus 32:32). Moses being blotted out of the book wouldn’t save anyone, because Moses himself deserved to be punished for his sins. But in that moment Moses points to Jesus Christ, who would be blotted out on the cross so that his people would not be blotted out because of the sin of lust, among all other sins.

If Jesus has been blotted out for your sake, then God can now get out the hose on you. He can take you out back and scrub you on the washboard of mercy. It hurts, yes, but it’s with love. It’s so good to be spanked by God, because he spanks you as he does as a beloved child (Deuteronomy 8:5, Hebrews 12:5-8). He doesn’t banish you or exile you. He loves you like his own child.

Have you been trapped by the sin of lust? God can wash you as white as snow. Not pink. White. He can because Christ has been blotted out for you. This is the good news that will enable you to be like Joseph and say no to lust and to be like David and come back from it. Guilt or fear of STDs will not enable you to say no or come back out of a spiral of saying “yes” too many times, but the love of Christ, which compels us to stand up for holiness and honor, will.

What Joseph said to Potiphar’s wife is amazing. He said, “How could I sin against God? (Genesis 39:9, NIV).” The truth underneath that statement is that God loves Joseph very much. Joseph didn’t know that Jesus would die at Calvary for his sins. He didn’t foresee all the details of the gospel or the story of the Passover, but he did have the oral traditions of God sparing Abraham’s son on the mountain and of God coming to Adam and Eve and slaying an animal for them. In other words, Joseph said, “How could I return God’s love with such evil?” God was so attractive and beautiful to him that he didn’t just see adultery as the breaking of a rule but the breaking of God’s heart.

Five weapons against lust

This love will give us five weapons with which to fight the temptation of lust. First, instead of trying to fight lust with guilt, fear, and shame as the world does, we can fight lust successfully by arming ourselves with the good news that *God loves us*. And the knowledge of God's love comes from the Word. When Jesus was tempted, he began his defenses and counterattacks with, "It is written" (Matthew 4:1-11). He fought temptation with the Word of God, and this is also our second weapon to fight lust.

Job mentioned that he made a covenant with his eyes "not to look lustfully at a young woman" (Job 31:1, NIV). The third way you can fight temptation is by resolving not to feed it in the first place, as Paul says to "make no provision for the flesh" (Romans 13:14).

The fourth weapon against lust is simply fleeing it. As mentioned in a previous chapter, if Christ has died for your sins, then your sin is nailed to the cross. It still lashes out at you, but it's slowly dying. If you run, you have a chance. Joseph ran. If you think you don't have a problem with lust, just wait. To switch metaphors, it's not one of those sins that waits for you in the tall grass. It comes after you. That's why Paul says to flee it.

The fifth and final weapon we have in our fight against lust is having someone at our side—in fact, a whole community—to fight with us. Consider how David fought temptation and climbed out of the pit that lust had created. He had Nathan, someone to confront him and hold him accountable. Do you want a Nathan? Be a part of a local church.

The counterculture

Be a part of not any local church, but one that is trying to be a counterculture. If you're going to be effective in your fight against lust, you have to be a part of the sexual revolution. Seriously. You have to be a part of the countercultural movement of God called the Church. The Christian church grew within 300 years to be the dominant religion in the entire Roman empire. How did that happen? How did they reach Rome, and how will we reach our culture? By being part of a counterculture.

In the church, we are to be generous with our money but greedy with sex. The world is the exact opposite. They're greedy with money and generous with sex. We are to be inside of the counterculture that is in touch with reality; we have to know that the center of the universe is

God and therefore pursue and practice all things in light of his holiness, character, and commandments.

You may have been mocked because of your stance on sex inside of marriage. Joseph was thrown in jail for it. Joseph gave up everything for this stance, because he refused to live out of order with the universe that God has established. If you've been persecuted for your stance, you need a counterculture that affirms you and applauds you when you stand up for what's right and what's true. You don't need a church trying their best to be "cool" and "relevant." You need a church that wants to be a counterculture, that is running parallel to society, that puts sex in the right place. Let the church be your "Nathan." Without being in the flock you stand no chance. The wolf that is lust devours those at the fringes.