

GENERAL PRINCIPLES ABOUT SEXUAL DYNAMICS

While God has made sex to be pleasurable and given it a metaphysical dimension for humankind (cf. Paul's use of Genesis 2:24 in 1 Corinthians 6:16), the act is very much centered on reproduction (Genesis 1:28; cf. 1 Timothy 5:14). In light of that, one observes a certain pattern in creation. Animals live in sexual awareness of their environment, and their "antennae" regularly report sexual data to their brains. The primary data source for most mammals are the olfactory nerves, and the data on which they focus most of the time has to do with food, whether it's smelling the scent of ripe bananas or of a passing herd of wildebeests. For much of the time there are no sexual scents out there that are of any real interest to them, and they go about their predestined regimen in a fallen world, hunting, eating and sleeping.

Into this regimen comes a brief season when the female goes into estrus. Just before ovulation, her body produces a special scent that indicates her readiness to mate. Once a male picks up that scent, he loses his focus and departs from the regimen of normal life in a frenzied hunt to find the source of the scent and do his best to mate with her, sometimes even if it costs him rejection and death. In other words, both genders have a sexual awareness, but for the male, in addition to continually monitoring his environment for food, he also continually monitors his sexual environment. Most of the time, there are no distractions, but his "sexual antennae" are always up, and at some level of consciousness, he constantly takes a sexual inventory of whatever passes by his nose.

Among creatures created in the divine image, though scent can be a powerful stimulus, sight is our primary tool in navigating our environment. And so, instead of our brains receiving most of their data through our olfactory nerves, we rely on our optic nerves. But a similar sexual pattern exists in spite of our reliance on a different set of cranial nerves. The human male goes about his tasks continually monitoring his environment, generally not focused on reproduction. Nevertheless, at some level, he is continually taking a sexual inventory of whatever passes by his eyes, very often with little distraction.

As with other animals, female humans send signals when they are receptive to mating. Scent is part of this, but fundamentally sight is the major trigger. I don't want to get too graphic here, but in monitoring their environments, males pick up on the presence of a female who is receptive to mating by the way she looks, from the color in her face and the shape of parts of her body, to how she carries herself.

One difficulty in our advanced civilization is that we have learned to fake those signals by means of makeup and clothing. Here is how it works.

Jethro Bodine is a godly man who works for the Acme Widget Company. He's been married to Daisy Mae for ten years, has three children and is a member of the Saint Vidas Presbyterian Church. He and his wife have sex on an average of twice a week. Early on in his marriage, Jethro made a Job 31:1 covenant with his eyes at a Bill Gothard seminar. Jethro is aware of his environment. His Uncle Jed walks by, and at a very primitive but subtle level, Jethro's brain picks up signals, but there is nothing that indicates that Uncle Jed is a candidate for reproductive activity. At work the same phenomenon takes place, but Mrs. Finch is older than Jethro's mother, a very devout Baptist and quite modest in how she carries herself and in how she dresses. At a subtle level, Jethro's brain is monitoring his environment and constantly taking sexual inventories, but the second wife of Atticus Finch never sends out a "come hither" signal, and so Jethro is never really tempted to fantasize about Mrs. Finch.

Then Mrs. Finch retires and Acme Widget hires Mayella Violet Ewell for the secretary pool. Young Ms. Ewell has just finished her third marriage and is twenty-seven. She wears tight skirts and blouses with plunging neck lines. Her lips are always quite red, and she wears high heels that cause her rear end to move in a particularly engaging way. It isn't that Mayella is necessarily receptive to male advances; it's just that she sends off signals, but they are a learned affectation and not necessarily indicative of her heart. She has a deep-seated need to reassure herself that she still "has what it takes," and her insecurities go back to childhood.

As with Jethro's subtle awareness of Mrs. Finch's female sexuality, he picks up on Mayella's, immediately and almost intuitively taking an inventory of her most prominent features. The trouble is there is nothing subtle about Mayella's sexuality and the signals that she sends—they shout for his attention. When he's introduced to her in the office, he can't help but notice the amount of cleavage that she reveals. Later at a coffee break, he overhears two other men in the office chatting about Ms. Ewell, what's real and what's false and what they would each like to do. Jethro prays silently, turns and walks back to his desk. During the rest of the break, he reads the eleventh chapter of 2 Samuel and prays again. As the afternoon wears on, from time to time a mental picture of her cleavage passes across his mind, but he prays and turns his attention back to his work.

So far Jethro has not sinned. Each time one of Satan's imps puts a tape of Mayella

into Jethro's mental DVD, Jethro presses the eject button. Jethro loves his wife Daisy Mae very much and values a pure heart and clean conscience. When they pray together that evening he never mentions the new employee at Acme. All is well.

Four nights later, Jethro wakes up in the middle of the night, his heart pounding. He just had an erotic dream about Mayella Ewell which he thoroughly enjoyed and for which he feels profoundly guilty. He lies in bed, pondering what just happened and why he enjoyed himself so much. "Was that my flesh? Was it a succubus? What in the world is going on? Oh God! Please forgive me. I'm so sorry."

He tells Daisy Mae nothing the next morning and heads off to work. Has Jethro self-consciously chosen to sin yet? No, but he's in difficulty. The erotic dream reminds him that he has not achieved sinless perfection and never will this side of heaven. It's also a kind of divine wake up call, filtered through his subconscious mind, warning him that he needs to take some steps to tend to matters before they get out of hand. But Jethro has not deliberately sinned yet, not even in his imagination. He hasn't yet self-consciously lusted for Ms. Ewell, even though his brain has been picking up sexual stimuli and registering them at a primitive level. Later on that morning, when he walks over to get a cup of coffee and Mayella Ewell comes over to join him, he feels profoundly ill at ease, as if they actually had been intimate together the night before. Thoughts dash through his mind, "She knows!" "Did she have the same dream?" "God help me!"

The struggle is more difficult now, after the dream. When he notices Ms. Ewell bending over to pick up a piece of paper, he catches himself staring at her rear end. "God help me!" he almost shouts out loud to God when he realizes what he is doing. Sin is beginning to impact him even though he hasn't yet let one of those imps play a tape in his mental DVD.

What should Jethro do? I'm not sure that he should go to his wife, but I am sure that he needs to contact a brother in Christ for help, perhaps his pastor or one of the elders.

What would I tell Jethro if he came to me? First of all, I would pray with him. Then I would make sure that he understood that his reactions are normal and natural in a fallen world, but I would also press him to understand the potential danger he is in, and I would open up the book of James and talk to him about temptation.

‘When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.’ (James 1:13-15). I would lay out before him the dreadful consequences of his not pressing the eject button on his mental DVD, and I would do this very graphically by describing things that might happen to his wife and three children, if he were to fall into sin.

Then I would turn to James 3:15 and explain how he has three enemies to battle: the world, the flesh and the devil. I would press him to take very seriously the importance of not looking over at Ms. Ewell, and when he found himself thinking about her, both to pray and to command those thoughts to get out of his mind in Jesus’ name. I would ask him to see if there was a way that he could arrange his office space where Ms. Ewell was not so constantly before his eyes. I would urge him to keep close to his wife, maintaining regular sexual activity with her. And I would make him commit to keeping in contact with me. “Here’s my cell phone number. You call me whenever you need prayer.” I would urge him to believe that God will give him victory over this.

But I’m not sure that I would press him to tell his wife. I don’t believe that it is good for a marriage for a man to give a daily report to his wife on every female he notices: “Daisy Mae, this morning at work I caught myself staring at our new employee, Mayella Ewell’s rear end when she bent over. At noon over at McDonalds, a buxom girl in a halter top caught my eye. I didn’t allow myself to fantasize about her, but it was sure a struggle not to take a second and third look. This afternoon, as I drove up, I noticed our neighbor, Lolita Haze, sunbathing in her backyard in a bikini, and I had some trouble reining in my thoughts even though she’s only fifteen—Wow! She could pass for twenty-five!”

It is enough to say that we all struggle with sin, and each person’s struggle has some unique qualities about it. Furthermore, it’s important to distinguish between the temptation to sin and mental sin. The one is not sin; the other is. Noticing a person’s physical attributes isn’t sin; playing a tape in the theater of our mind about that person, fantasizing about having sex with her is. All of which should lead us regularly and earnestly to pray: “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (Matthew 6:13).

ROOTED IN GRACE

In the story above I am focusing on two things: the natural roots of sexual temptations and the importance of accountability. But if I stop here, I have failed to deal with the heart of the matter which is Christ himself: his love for us and the powerful effect of our love for him.

The driving force in our pursuit of holiness must be Jesus Christ. Jesus' righteousness is the ground of God hearing our prayers, and Jesus' love for us encourages us to pray. The glory and honor of the name of Jesus presses us. The goal of the Christian life is not mere morality; it is complete conformity to the restored image of God in the face of the Lord Jesus. And the means of grace are not like spiritual vitamin pills that contain a mysterious substance that helps us be better people: the means of grace are paths to Jesus, a means of connecting and communing with him. For our diligent use of all the outward means of grace to do us great and lasting good, they must bring us to the foot of the cross of the Lord Jesus, where we can lose ourselves and find ourselves. They must bring us to him as he is offered in the gospel, and bring us again and again.

That's true for preaching and for prayer, and it's true for other ordinances as well. Baptism is a means to Christ. If it does not lead us into a life of trust and devotion to Christ, of our regularly turning from sin to him, we may well question if we have experienced the reality of baptism after all. The Lord's Supper really is a means of grace; it is a pathway to Jesus. When we eat the bread and drink from the cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes (1 Corinthians 11:26). But the Supper is more than a visual lecture: God's Word is never an empty Word; the proclamation of the Word of promise produces the reality of the promise. In the case of the Supper: Christ himself, crucified, once for all time, on the cross for helpless sinners. He is present in the Supper to nourish us by the work of the Holy Spirit. Christ, who physically sits at the right hand of the Father in heaven, from where he will physically come again, is present with us as the Holy Spirit makes the reality of our already being seated in heavenly places in Christ Jesus real to us (Ephesians 1:3; 2:6; Hebrews 12:22-24).

The goal of these means of grace is that our hearts would be filled with the glory of God and increased in devotion and affection for the Son of God. "Christ's love compels us" (2 Corinthians 5:14). And the truth is sealed to us that as citizens of heaven who have already passed from death to life, as members of Christ's own Body, even in this present darkness, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us and gave up himself for us. "Sin shall not be master over" us; we are "under grace" (Romans 6:14), a grace that removes the guilt and the power of sin.

Furthermore, in the Jethro story, I am in no way defending a person's indulging in lustful thoughts, nor am I saying that human beings are exactly like animals. I am simply saying that there are some analogies between the ways that animals respond to natural stimuli and the ways that we do. But we are absolutely unique, because we alone have been created in the image of God and endowed with a reasonable soul. Unlike those "unreasoning animals," we are not at the mercy of our natural impulses, and God will hold us accountable for our failure to restrain these drives, even in the privacy of our own thoughts.

I am also asserting that a man's being aware of the attractiveness of a female is not the same as sexual lust—there is often a fine line, to be sure, but there is a line, nonetheless. Furthermore, a temptation to sexual sin and a fellow's indulging in a sexual fantasy are also two different things. Temptation is not sin. Our Lord was tempted in all the ways that we are, but our Lord never sinned, not even in his thought life: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). My advice to every man is to avoid situations where he will be tempted to lust. After all, a defiled heart is very deadly; as our Lord warned in the context of dealing with sexual lust: "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell" (Matthew 5:29).

The heart of the Jethro story is my assertion that a woman can barrage a man with sexual stimuli. Those stimuli will distract any man and pose an occasion for stumbling into sin. That's why women must be careful how they dress and why men must resist these stimuli in order to keep a conscience void of offense. Just as a loud noise will cause me to stop what I'm doing and look to see the source of the sound, so a female who is dressed very provocatively is a distraction as well. Males have a natural impulse to look, and this goes back to the basic pattern of nature: a female indicates her openness, and a male responds by courting the female.

Please know that I meant no offense, but I am concerned very much that men and women take occasions of sin seriously, especially sexual sin in our all too permissive and provocative culture. Over the decades my wife and I have ministered to many people who have fallen into sexual sin, and I can assure you that we take sexual sin dreadfully seriously: it always leaves a swath of terrible destruction in its wake.

We need to remember that to say something is “natural” is not the same as saying it is good. Because of the sin of our first parents, we are all born with a fallen nature, so what comes “naturally” is not exactly the same after the Fall as before. As human beings, we are all in the image of God, but that image has been radically marred, and nothing is exactly the way that it was in our first parents. We are totally depraved—not that we are as bad as we can possibly be, but no part of us has escaped the ravages and influence of sin, including our capacity to reason and our how we relate to others sexually.

WOMEN DON'T GET OFF THE HOOK

I am not saying that men are more easily sexually tempted than women, but I am saying that sight is the primary “trigger” for most males’ sexual temptation. In sexual matters, women are just as affected by sin as men are; it’s simply that sexual sin is often more subtle and deceptive for many women, and they tend to fail to recognize it as quickly as men. Most men know when they are indulging a sinful fantasy, and I don’t need to go into graphic details. But I’ll give a snapshot to reflect how some romance novels can function as pornography for people who are not chemically driven by testosterone:

‘We sat on the veranda, sipping a fine vintage of Cabernet sauvignon. It was an elegant restaurant, as delightful as any place I’d ever seen, and our table overlooked the Mediterranean. The Gypsies played Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata,” soft and sensual. As the gentle breeze blew, his rugged face glowed bronze with strength in the light of the setting sun. When we lifted our glasses, our knuckles brushed against each other, and I knew that I had never known true love before.

‘My new job had carried me far from the tiresome boredom of a never ending set of dirty dishes and dirty diapers, of an insensitive and sometimes boorish husband, but now . . .’

Well, it may not always be that graphic; sometimes it’s just a woman thinking about how insensitive or unromantic her husband is and wishing that he could be more like Mrs. So-and-so’s. Visible nudity does not tend to have the same impact on most women that it does on most men. Pass the word that the Scotsman in the kilt isn’t wearing anything underneath, and the reaction of most females is disgust. Pass the word that the young woman sitting on the platform with a short skirt has nothing else on, and almost every male will be tempted to sneak a peak, whether

he's significantly pre-pubescent or just arrived from the geriatric ward in his wheelchair.

Of course, some women do struggle with visual temptations to lust, but I believe for most women this is a "learned" behavior, not unlike somebody's acquiring a taste for Bourbon Whiskey or cigars—people don't like these things the first time they taste them; it's an acquired taste. Women are more often tempted by strong character, power, kindness and attention—it's why an ugly, old, paunchy senator, doctor, or even a preacher can be a snare to some women.

But I'm speaking in glittering generalities, and there are plenty of exceptions.

In our struggle with sin, we all come from different backgrounds, genetically and environmentally. No one is born a homosexual, but the way that original sin works itself out in each person may make one person more vulnerable to homosexual temptations, while another person may more easily be tempted in the area of stealing and another have more difficulty with a hot temper. But we all choose to sin when we sin, and we're all responsible for our choices.

If you have grasped the righteousness that God demands, a righteousness that exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, as it is worked out practically by the Lord Jesus in anger, as we saw last week, and in sexual desire, as we are considering now, then you are a fool if you think that you can stand before a holy God in the rags of your own faithfulness, good deeds, and righteousness. But these examples that follow Matthew 5:20 are not only given so that we will repent and trust in Christ alone for salvation—God's act of justification by faith; they are also given to press the importance of our seeking God to change our hearts in his great work of sanctification.

The bottom line is that the Church is full of real Christians . . . people who have been declared righteous merely through faith in Jesus Christ, but people who have also begun to experience the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. That sanctifying work is best done in a context of a church that preaches the Law and the Gospel, under an overarching banner of grace and accepts people as they are. A good church should never allow an environment that encourages people to pretend that they are something that they aren't, but should provide structures for honesty and accountability as sin is dealt with. It needs to be a community where saints encourage each other to press on for victory, lifting them up when they fall. We must do all that we can to arm people up and encourage them to "press on toward

the goal to win the prize for which God has called” them “heavenward in Christ Jesus.” They will never “obtain all this” or be “made perfect” in this life, but they can be cheered on as they forget “what is behind and” strain “toward what is ahead,” nothing less than full conformity to Christ in the resurrection (Philippians 3:14, 12, 13, 10, 11).