

Seven Sins, Seven Virtues: Lust & Chastity

2 Samuel 11:1-27; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

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Part One: Lust

We are on our fourth Sunday of our summer series on the seven deadly sins and the seven holy virtues.

Today we're looking at lust/chastity.

I'm not going to lie. When we decided to do a summer worship series on the seven deadly sins, this was the one that I immediately dreaded.

Lust, at least as the term is most commonly used and understood, has to do with sex. And it's hard to talk well about anything related to sex.

This is an intimate and private part of our lives. Matters of sexuality can also be very controversial. People have strong opinions about these things (you may have noticed).

We haven't always—or even *often*—managed to talk about sex well in church. Too often, the church's strategy when it comes to matters of sex has been a combination of avoiding the topic entirely or basically implying that the entire domain of sex and desire is bad or dirty or off limits for good Christians. Both approaches leave much to be desired.

It's also difficult to talk well about lust in the broader culture where it's almost not even an issue. The sexual liberation train that left the station in the 1960's has been accelerating ever since.

Whether it's the broad acceptance of apps designed to facilitate casual sex or the ubiquity of pornography or the saturation of entertainment culture with sex, ours is a context in which lust is given pretty much free reign.

One article I read this week estimated that no less than 30% of all data transferred on the Internet is pornography. I was surprised the number was that low. Another headline proclaimed, “Porn Sites Get More Visitors Each Month Than Netflix, Amazon and Twitter Combined.”

Not surprisingly, human desire is enormously profitable. Jonathan Grant, in his book *Divine Sex*, says this:

[C]apitalism’s approach to human identity and social relations undermines the formation of sexual fidelity by shaping our choices along purely consumerist lines... As our sexuality has become increasingly detached from its essential purposes—relationships, marriage, children—it has become simply a mode of consumption. As a result, human sexuality has become part of the entertainment industry—a choice to be catered to rather than a vocation that serves any greater goal...

Consumerism trains us to acquire, consume, and move on, with novelty as our guiding impulse. The sad reality, though, is that we do with things, we will inevitably do with people.¹

This sad reality is demonstrated in our Old Testament story this morning.

Perhaps you noticed that today’s reading has a lot in common with last Sunday’s story of King Ahab’s greedy desire for Naboth’s vineyard. As we heard last week, Ahab’s wife Jezebel convinces Ahab that the king should have what the king wants, so she arranges for Naboth to be killed as punishment for false blasphemy charges. And Ahab gets the vineyard that his greedy heart desires.

In today’s story, we meet another king who wants something that doesn’t belong to him. King David is lounging about Jerusalem while the Israelite army is off making war with the Ammonites. He decides to take a walk up on the roof of his palace and sees a beautiful woman bathing. And his desire is kindled.

He sends for Bathsheba. She comes (she has no choice in the matter). He sleeps with her and she gets pregnant. Indeed, the only words we hear from Bathsheba in the entire story are, “I am pregnant.” The way the story is told underscores her complete lack of agency in this entire

¹ Jonathan Grant, *Divine Sex: A Compelling Vision for Christian Relationships in a Hypersexualized Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2015), 80.

narrative. She is the object of David's desire, a product to consume and not much more.

But now that she's pregnant, David has a problem to deal with. He first brings Bathsheba's husband Uriah back from battle hoping that he'll have sex with his wife and the baby will be thought to be his. But Uriah refuses to enjoy the comforts of home while his men are still at war.

So, David tells the commander of the army to put Uriah at the front where the fighting is fiercest and where he will likely be killed. And this is, of course, what happens.

With Uriah out of the way, David takes what he wants. He *takes* (the word is telling) Bathsheba as his wife.

In the stories of both David and Ahab, a human life is sacrificed on the altar of greedy desire.

In the next chapter, David is rebuked by the prophet Nathan for his sin. He does this via a parable about a rich man who had a large flock of sheep and yet stole the one sheep that a poor man owned. David "burned with anger" at the telling of this story, until Nathan makes the obvious connection (obvious to everyone except David!).

"You are the man! You struck down Uriah with the sword and took his wife. And now the sword will never depart from your house."

David would, unfortunately, experience this to be true. His punishment would come to pass years later when one of his sons, Absalom, led an insurrection that plunged the kingdom into civil war.

The legacy of David's sin with Bathsheba has echoed down the ages and through the pages of Scripture. Bathsheba bore him a son, Solomon, who would be one of Israel's greatest king, but also one of its greatest philanderers, having countless foreign women and concubines who the Bible describes as drawing him away from the Lord.

This story also led to David penning Psalm 51, one of the most well-loved psalms in Scripture, where David confesses his sin.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

How many people throughout history, I wonder, have clung to these words in the aftermath of their own sin?

The story echoes down right to the story of Jesus. Jesus is, of course, part of the lineage of David. Genealogies aren't usually terribly exciting reading, but it's fascinating to see how Jesus' ancestors are described in Matthew 1.

I'm going to join the genealogy mid-stream, just reading verses 5-6:

Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab (*the prostitute*),
Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth (*who was a foreigner*),
Obed the father of Jesse,
and Jesse the father of King David.

David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife...

The first pages of the story of Jesus insist on reminding the reader of David's sin, pointing out that Jesus has a complicated family full of mixed up characters.

The bible insists upon naming and drawing attention to the women, despite the ways in which they are used and marginalized in large parts of the story.

And, in naming Uriah, it also insists that we remember the victims of powerful men. It acknowledges this gaping wound in the biblical narrative, where "the man after God's own heart" gave in to lust and how this led not only to a spiraling series of egregious personal sins, but ultimately the unraveling of the Israelite kingdom.

Lust is fundamentally about self and about power.

It destroys relationships. It is corrosive to human souls. It reduces us to our most primal instincts rather than calling us to the full dignity of being human, to disciplining and training our impulses and locating them in appropriate contexts.

Lust severs our desire for sex from human love and intimacy and trust and fidelity. It reduces human beings to objects of personal gratification. It is the ultimate selfish act.

Again, David's story is an extreme example of lust and the abuse of power.

But the pull of desire, the hunger for our own selfish cravings to be gratified with little thought or care for the other, the reducing of other human beings to commodities to be consumed, the self-

justification and manipulation and shame that comes with transgression...

I suspect these are temptations that many of us can resonate with, too.

This is who we are. These are the selves that we bring to confession.

Part Two: Chastity

It's taken eight long years, but it's come to my attention that I may have finally said something untrue in a sermon.

(That's a joke, in case you're wondering... or in case you haven't been paying attention for the last eight years ☺.)

During last week's sermons, I repeated a quote several times, taken from an interpretation of the Reformation-era Anglican churchman Thomas Cranmer:

What the heart loves, the will chooses, and the mind justifies.

This quote rang true to me as I thought about the scriptures and theme of the day, and of the psychological dynamics of sin and how we think and act, etc. Some of you identified with this phrase after last week's service.

Well, I got into the car after coffee last Sunday and Naomi said, "That was a really interesting quote... but, do you think it's actually true? Doesn't it go the other way, too? We come to a conclusion in our minds, and then our wills try to make choices that align with this conclusion, and then gradually our hearts come to love it?"

I promptly rebuked her for questioning her pastor. ☺ No, just kidding. I didn't do that.

I thought about it. And I realized that she was right. It *can* and *does* go the opposite way as well.

What the mind justifies, the will chooses, and the heart comes to love.

The most obvious example that came to mind was that of marriage counseling. I have heard many counselors say that when a couple comes in complaining that they have fallen out of love, they will instruct them to try to *act* like they love each other and see if the feelings fall in line.

The process begins with a justification in the mind (we made a covenant and the relationship is worth working on) proceeds to the domain of the will (we will choose to act in loving ways, even if we don't always feel loving) and, if all goes well, will end with the softening of hearts to feel the

warmth of a love that was thought to be lost.

Marriage counselors don't say, "Well, just wait until you feel something for your spouse in your heart, and then watch as your will falls in line and your mind justifies your original commitment." If a counselor told you that, I would be the first to suggest that you find a different counselor!

Sometimes, clearly, we have *think* and *act* our way into *feeling*.

So, what I said last week was only a *partial* truth. It's true, that sometimes it is our hearts that lead the way and our wills and minds fall in line behind. It's true that we are what we love and that this often takes precedence over reason.

But it's also true that sometimes the will and the mind are the means by which the heart is transformed and is opened into loving in better, more holistic ways.

We are complex creatures and our various faculties don't work in neat formulas. The heart, mind, and will are kind of woven together and work in complex patterns that reinforce and justify and, at their best, aspire to higher things.

I think this is certainly true when it comes to the sin of lust and the virtue we should be aspiring to, which is chastity.

Chastity. That's a word that probably requires some unpacking.

For some, it might almost be synonymous with "celibacy" (it's not). Or, it might call to mind a time when women's virtue was policed by men, or when people were ruled over by puritanical religious leaders who set forth restrictions around sex and desire that were not only virtually impossible but also unhealthy.

It probably seems like a quaint word in an age where, as I mentioned earlier, lust has been virtually sanctified, so ubiquitous is it in our advertising and entertainment.

Somewhere between puritanical assumptions that sexual desire is bad and to be extinguished and the hypersexualized culture that we see today, where every desire exists only to be fulfilled, is chastity.

Chastity, in the Christian tradition, simply means an appreciation and practice of the gift of sex in the context within which it was meant to be expressed. It acknowledges the goodness of sex, but also understands that sexual desire is powerful and easily abused, that it requires moderation.

What the mind justifies, the will must keep choosing so that the heart will come to love in better, less selfish ways.

Chastity affirms both the power and the goodness of sexual desire and insists that it be expressed in the context of covenant relationships characterized by fidelity, trust, mutual sacrifice, and emotional vulnerability.

Chastity refuses the pleasing lie that sexual desire can be acted upon casually without consequences, that human sexuality really boils down to little more than individual pleasure and consent, which is, of course, the mantra of our time.

Chastity asks us to understand human selfhood and sexual desire in completely different terms. It takes as basic Paul's command to the church in Corinth:

You are not your own. You were bought with a price, therefore honour God with your bodies.

You are not our own. There could hardly be a more countercultural claim to make in our day and age, whether we're talking about sex or anything else. We don't like to hear this.

We have been thoroughly conditioned to believe that we *are* our own—that we are sovereign individuals, that we have the right to what we want, that the central human task is discover our authentic selves and project those selves out to the world for affirmation.

We have been conditioned by a consumeristic capitalist economy to believe that we, the consumer, are always right. We have been conditioned by advertisers to believe that there is a product waiting to satisfy our every desire—that we deserve it!

We very easily transfer all of these assumptions into the realm of sex and desire.

Against all of this, the Christian virtue of chastity says, "No. Sexual desire is good and can be an important expression of committed love; but it is also powerful and can be easily distorted toward selfish ends."

Fundamentally, Jesus shows us that the highest expressions of love are other-focused, not self-focused.

Lust seeks the gratification of the self above all else.

Chastity understands that, like all of God's good gifts, sexual desire must be disciplined and made subservient to the higher ends of love that Christ calls us to and which Christ modeled most fully in setting aside his own desires and going the way of the cross.

May God help our minds, will, and hearts to come together in the training, disciplining, and ultimately liberating of our desires from the tyranny of selfishness.

May we seek to honour God with our bodies, and with all of who we are.

Amen.

