

Lust

Series: *Taming the Monster Within*

Apr. 2, 2023

Matthew 5:27-30

Today we come to the final message in our series on the Seven Deadly Sins. The series is called *Taming the Monster Within*, and so far we've look at the deadly sins of *pride, envy, anger, sloth, greed* and *gluttony*.

We've endeavoured to give parents of children and younger youth a heads up about today's message, and I'd like to take this opportunity do so once more just to ensure no one is taken off guard.

Today, we're going to be exploring the last of the Seven Deadly Sins—*lust*— and so

If you have your Bible, please turn to Matthew 5:27-30, and follow along as I read these words of Jesus. I'll be reading from the NLT, the New Living Translation:

"You have heard the commandment that says, 'You must not commit adultery.' But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. So if your eye—even your good eye—causes you to lust, 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. And if your hand—even your stronger hand—causes you to sin, cut it off 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.¹

Now in today's culture, many people—perhaps including you—would have a negative reaction to those words of Jesus. "Aha, see?" some people would say. "There's that negative view of sex that Christians always seem to have. I mean, isn't this passage pretty much saying that anyone who has sexual desire is on their way to hell?"

But that would be a huge misunderstanding, both of what Jesus means in this text, as well as of the Bible's overall view of human sexuality. The Christian view of sex, while radically different from that of prevailing culture, is arguably among the most attractive aspects of Christianity when it's understood rightly. I hope that will become apparent to you over the course of this message.

That said, it remains true that both culture and the church send us mixed messages about sex. As author Rebecca DeYoung asks:

[Is sex] the enemy, the forbidden fruit, the greatest and most shameful of all sins, or is it the key to happiness, the ultimate fulfillment of desire? Is it a picture of our relationship with God, holy and pure, or a matter of casual weekend recreation? ... If... sexual free-for-alls and one-time hook-ups are premised on a notion of sex as

¹ Matthew 5:27-30 (NLT)

just for fun, why do secular rock songs also extol a ‘hold me in your arms forever’ view of sex that is linked to love and promises of life-long exclusiveness?²

So the prevailing culture for sure—but also in many cases the church (as we’ll see touch on later this message) — send us mixed messages about sex. As if we needed any more confusion about this incredibly complex and hard-to-talk-about subject that impacts our lives so deeply.

Let’s see if we can cut through a bit of that confusion today. With the Matthew 5 passage we just read as our jumping-off point, I’d like to share with you four biblical insights about sex. The first insight has to do with:

1. The goodness of sex.

Our passage in Matthew 5 comes from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. In that famous sermon, Jesus instructs us about how we are to live as his followers in just about every aspect of life, including our sexuality. Our passage begins with Jesus saying:

“You have heard the commandment that says, ‘You must not commit adultery.’ But I say...”³

Here, Jesus refers back to the Old Testament—and specifically, to the seventh of the Ten Commandments: “You must not commit adultery.”⁴

If we want to understand what Jesus is saying about sex in Matthew 5, we need to have at least some understanding of the Old Testament sexual ethic that Jesus accepts as a given. Many today will automatically assume or expect that the Old Testament view of sex would be largely negative. But listen to the evidence and judge for yourself whether the Old Testament has a negative view of sex.

In the Bible’s very first chapters, God brings Eve to Adam, and Adam bursts into this ecstatic love poem as he sees the woman: “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” And don’t forget, they’re both naked, according to the text.⁵

I once heard it said that the Bible begins with a naked man singing rapturous love songs over a naked woman in the presence of God. And that’s just the beginning of the story!

Let’s look at another example from the book of Proverbs, where husbands are exhorted to:

Let your wife be a fountain of blessing for you.
Rejoice in the wife of your youth.

² Rebecca DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins*, p. 159.

³ Matthew 5:27 (NLT)

⁴ See Exodus 20:14

⁵ See Genesis 2:18-25

She is a loving deer, a graceful doe.
Let her breasts satisfy you always.
May you always be captivated by her love. ⁶

Some of you are thinking, “That’s in the Bible?” Why yes; yes it is.

But that verse is nothing compared to any number of lines from an Old Testament book called the Song of Solomon, which is essentially a poetic celebration of the delights of romantic and indeed sexual love between a husband and a wife.

In fact, Song of Solomon chapter 7 has been called the sexiest chapter of the Bible. ⁷ (And all God’s people began to look up that chapter on their Bible app.) Go ahead, look it up, and you’ll get a sense of what I’m saying when it comes to the poetically unabashed way the Bible celebrates the goodness of sex.

Later in the message, we’ll consider the goodness of sex on an even more profound level.

But hopefully through this brief sampling of Old Testament texts, the point is clear enough. The Bible rejoices unashamedly at the glories of sexual love.

Listen. If you think the Bible has a negative view of sex, you didn’t get that view from actually reading and studying the Bible. You got it somewhere else.

In fact, the Bible shows us that God so affirms the goodness of sex, and the incredible bonding power of sexual intimacy, that in his wisdom, and for our good, he placed a boundary around it. Which brings us to our second insight.

2. The boundary of sex.

We’ve seen in Matthew 5:27 that Jesus refers back to the seventh commandment, “You must not commit adultery.” This a God-given boundary for sex. Jesus then expands that boundary to include not just the physical act of adultery, but lustful looks and thoughts as well.

This raises a question. If the Bible really does affirm that sex is so good, why put boundaries on it like that?

Jesus would likely respond to such a question by going back even further, to the story of creation, where we see God’s original intentions for human sexuality. That’s exactly what Jesus does in Matthew 19, where he says:

“Haven’t you read... that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to

⁶ Proverbs 5:18-19 (NLT)

⁷ For example, see Song of Solomon 7

his wife, and the two will become one flesh' ? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." ⁸

Here, Jesus refers to Genesis chapter two, where the union of Adam and Eve essentially stands as the prototype—God's intended design— for both marriage and human sexuality: "A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."

The phrase "be united" speaks of a relationship of exclusivity and life-long commitment. The phrase "the two shall become one flesh" points to sexual union, and particularly, the act of sexual intercourse.

So Jesus takes us back to the beginning of creation, and reminds us that God's design was for sex to take place within the boundary of marriage—a relationship meant to be more permanent than even the parent-child relationship, as you "leave" your parents, so to speak, to become united to your spouse— no longer two, but one.

Why this boundary for sex? Well, by God's design, sex is much more than a mere physical act. There are also deep emotional and spiritual consequences when two people become one flesh. Indeed, from a biblical point of view, there's no such thing as casual sex. For example, the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians:

Don't you know that he who unites himself with a prostitute becomes one with her in body? For it is said, "The two shall become one flesh." ⁹

Isn't it interesting that this verse refers to an encounter with a prostitute as a "one flesh" experience—the same phrase used elsewhere in scripture to describe the deep, mystical union between a husband and a wife? So even in a one-time sexual encounter with a prostitute, something much more profound and binding happens than just the temporary joining of two bodies physically.

Therefore, God ordains that sex must take place within the protective boundary of a marriage covenant. In marriage, sex is meant to serve as a physical sign of the binding promise of permanence shared between a husband and a wife. It's a vehicle for engaging the whole person in an act of self-giving and commitment.

With this in mind, C.S. Lewis writes that:

The monstrosity of sexual intercourse outside of marriage is that those who indulge in it are trying to isolate one kind of union—the sexual—from all other kinds of union, which were intended to go along with it and make up the total union.

⁸ Matthew 19:4-6 (NIV)

⁹ 1 Corinthians 6:16 (NIV)

- C.S. Lewis

In marriage, however, sex helps you strengthen and celebrate your whole-life commitment to each another. It's meant to deepen, nurture and solidify the relationship.

But outside of marriage, when you're willing to do with your body what you're unwilling to do with the rest of your life, sex has the opposite effect.

Sex can be compared to a mighty river that brings life and well-being to the surrounding countryside when it flows properly within its banks. But if that river violates those boundaries, and floods the countryside, the result is the opposite of life—it's devastation.

Theologian Frederick Buechner put it another way. He wrote that sex is like nitroglycerin: "It can be used either to blow up bridges or to heal hearts."

Which is why God, in his wisdom and love, ordains that the only place where sex can safely deliver its life-giving power—its bonding power, its healing power, its power to literally create new life— is within the boundary of marriage.

This leads to our next biblical insight, which gets to the heart of what Jesus is addressing in our Matthew 5 passage:

3. The problem of lust.

Jesus has taken us back to the Old Testament, reminding us that by God's design, sex should not take place outside of marriage. But he doesn't just leave us there. He takes us further, saying, "Now let's talk about your thought life."

"You have heard the commandment that says, 'You must not commit adultery.' But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart."¹⁰

And this would not just be about men's lust for women. This would apply to any lust any of us may have toward anyone.

Again, it would be easy to interpret Jesus' words as morally uptight and sexually repressive— as if any kind of sexual desire we could ever have is dirty and puts us in danger of divine judgment.

But that's not what Jesus means. How do we know this? First, as we've already seen, the Bible views sex as a good gift from a good God. And second, of all the words Jesus could have used to describe sexual desire, the specific phrase used in this passage—the phrase we translate as "lust"— has strong overtones of greed and idolatry.

¹⁰ Matthew 5:27-28 (NLT)

Now we talked about the deadly sin of greed a couple weeks ago. If we take a moment to do a quick refresher on what greed is about, we'll be well-positioned to understand what Jesus is saying about lust in this passage.

Greed takes hold of us when we have an attitude toward money that is:

- Selfish
- Addictive
- Driven by fantasy

First, greed is selfish. I want money for me. I don't want to share it or give it away. Second, greed is addictive. Greedy people feel like they *have to have* money—they can't live without it— so they'll bend rules, use people, become workaholics, and sacrifice relationships just to get more. Thirdly, greed is driven by fantasy. If you're a greedy person, you'll often fantasize about what you're going to do or buy or how you're going to feel once you acquire a certain amount of money or certain possessions.

The bottom line of greed is that you're looking to money to give you the deep sense of security and self-worth that only God can give you. Greed is a form of idolatry in which you make money your functional god.

In Matthew 5, Jesus is saying that lust is about having same kind of idolatrous attitude toward sex that a greedy person has toward money. **Lust turns sex into an idol.** As with money, we can turn sex into something that is selfish, addictive, and driven by fantasy. That's what happens when we look to sex to give us what only God can give us. Rebecca DeYoung sums it up well when she says that:

Lust is a problem with the heart above your belt before it is a problem with the heat below it.

- Rebecca DeYoung¹¹

Let me share with you now four examples of lust as sexual idolatry.

First there's pornography. In lust, sexual pleasure gets divorced from love and mutual self-giving. But sex is not meant to be a consumer good. It's not supposed to be about "what's in it for me." It's meant to keep a marriage bond strong, as well as for procreation. But with pornography, you're so completely focused on self that you're the only person directly involved.

It's a party for one. No sacrifice or commitment or consideration of anyone else is required. This is pretty much the polar opposite of what sex is meant to be, according to the Bible. Is

¹¹ Rebecca DeYoung, *Glittering Vices*, p. 163.

the use of pornography selfish? Obviously. Is it addicting? Powerfully so—it actually re-wires your brain. Is it driven by fantasy? In every way.

People think that pornography, because it's consumed in private, really doesn't harm anyone else. But it develops in you crushingly unrealistic expectations regarding sexual performance and physical appearance that you will carry with you into your relationships, and potentially into your marriage. Pornography ruins your ability to remain faithful in a real relationship with a real person, and that can bring all kinds of hurt not just for you, but for those closest to you as well.

And never forget that when you consume pornography, on the other side of the images you gaze at are people's daughters and sons who are being exploited and in many cases have been brutally victimized by a dark and greedy industry. Pornography is anything but victimless.

A second example of sexual idolatry is when people are dating, and after a certain point, whether it be a week or a month or a year, one partner expects sex from the other just to keep the relationship going.

In fact, a recent sociological study reports that a large number of people who have sex outside of marriage, when asked why they do it, say, "In order to keep the relationship going." So if you've been going together long enough, there's this expectation that you need to have sex. Otherwise, what's the point of continuing the relationship?

Is that a selfish use of sex? Sure it is, whether you're threatening to end the relationship if your partner doesn't put out, or whether you're putting out for your partner just to make sure they don't leave you.

A third example of sexual idolatry is simply the belief that you can't have a happy and fulfilling life—that you can't possibly be a whole person—without an active sex life. Don't believe the lies of prevailing culture, which tell us that we can never possibly be happy and healthy and whole apart from continually acting on our sexual drives and desires. The Bible says no such thing.

If you're a Christian, the only object you can rightly look at and say, "I have to have that to be happy," is God. To say that of anything else, including sex, is to put that something in the place that only God should occupy.

It's a diabolical myth that you have to be sexually active to be the true you.

Here's a fourth example of sexual idolatry, which may not seem particularly sexual.

Do you have in your mind a dream—a fairy tale that has captured your heart—of finding your soul mate? Does that dream make you say, "If I could just find that person to complete me, then I'd finally be happy?"

Our society has made an idol out of the romantic idea that in order to be complete and fulfilled, you need to have a “significant other” in your life. And the church has bought into their own version of the same lie. How so? Well, often the church often makes single people feel “less-than” if they don’t find a mate and get married.

But what the church so often fails to emphasize is that the radical teaching of the Bible is that celibate singleness is as high and holy a vocation as marriage is.¹² Indeed, Jesus Christ—the perfect and complete human being—was himself single. Single person—you are already complete in Jesus *just as you are*.

Why does Jesus speak out so strongly against lust and sexuality idolatry, in whatever forms it may take? Remember, in our Matthew 5 passage he says:

So if your eye—even your good eye—causes you to lust, 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. And if your hand—even your stronger hand—causes you to sin, cut it off 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.¹³

Jesus is of course speaking metaphorically here. He’s not asking you to literally gouge out your eye or cut off your hand. What he means is that you need to take drastic measures to root out lust and sexual idolatry from your life. Why? Because God loves and cares about us, and our sexual idolatry does so much damage to us, as well to others. I mean, so many of us in this room or online right have already beheld the damage it can do, in one way or another.

When Jesus speaks of plucking out your eye or chopping off your hand, he’s saying, “Whatever you have to do to slay the monster of lust in your life, do it. Who do you need to talk to? What do you need to do to get some accountability? Where do you need to go to get help and support?”

Because lust—making an idol of sex—using it selfishly, getting addicted to it, filling your mind with fantasies about it, relying on it to give you the kind of deep fulfillment and sense of life and comfort that only God can give you—will destroy you if you don’t deal with it.

How can we be delivered from the deadly sin of lust? That brings us to our final insight about sex:

4. The future of love.

¹² See 1 Corinthians 7

¹³ Matthew 5:29-30 (NLT)

Oddly enough, Jesus' comments about hell in our Matthew 5 passage contain hints about how we can be delivered from sexual idolatry.

When he says, "It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell," the word he uses for hell is *Gehenna*. Gehenna was an actual place just outside of Jerusalem—it was essentially a dump where garbage was always burning.

So this word picture, Gehenna, suggests that hell is a place of unquenchable thirst, a place of unfulfilled longing, a place where our desire always burns but is never satisfied. We were made to know God and to have our deepest needs satisfied in him. So if we reject God, we lose the ability to have our deepest needs satisfied.

In this passage, Jesus is saying that if you're engaged in sexual sin, trusting sex to give you what your heart most wants and needs, you're like a person who's lost at sea on a raft, dying of thirst. Even though there's water all around, it can do nothing to quench your thirst, and the more you drink, you sicker you get.

So if sex outside a marriage covenant points toward hell, what does sex inside a marriage covenant or faithful celibacy in singleness point toward?

The Bible teaches that even the most rapturous sexual love between a husband and a wife is but a dim foretaste of what it's going to be like to fall into the arms of our true and eternal Spouse—Jesus Christ—when he returns to make all things new.

In Ephesians 5 Paul writes:

As the Scriptures say, "A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one." This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one.¹⁴

We've seen this before, haven't we? It's from the creation story in Genesis 2, which points to sexual union in the context of marriage. We've heard Jesus quoting it, and now Paul quotes it. Except Paul adds that sexual union in marriage is a picture of the way Jesus and his church are one.

According to the Bible, the church is the bride of Christ, and both married sex as well as celibate singleness are signs pointing to the fact that we will one day fall into the loving arms of Jesus, who is our true and eternal Spouse.

Revelation 22, the Bible's final chapter, includes this invitation:

¹⁴ Ephesians 5:31-32 (NLT)

The Spirit and the bride say, “Come.” Let anyone who hears this say, “Come.” Let anyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who desires drink freely from the water of life.”¹⁵

The “bride” in this text is the church— it’s us. We’re the bride of Christ. And to all who are thirsty, the Spirit of Jesus freely offers the water of life. Only he can quench your deepest thirst. Only he can meet your deepest needs, your truest longings, because whether you realize it or not, your heart’s deepest and truest yearning is for him.

Jesus once offered someone else living water to drink. Do you remember who it was? It was the woman at the well in John chapter 4.¹⁶

He told her, I’ve got water that if you drink it, you’ll never be thirsty again. So she said to him, “Sir give me this water so that I can drink it and never thirst again.” And Jesus said, “Go get your husband.”

An interesting request. She replied, “Sir, I don’t have a husband.” And Jesus said, “No, you don’t. You’ve had five husbands, and the man you’re living with now is not your husband.”

Why does Jesus bring up this woman’s complicated romantic life? Because he knows she’s been looking to illicit relationships to fulfill her deepest longings, but it’s been getting her nowhere. The only thing she had to show for it was a string of broken marriages. Jesus was saying, you’ve been trying to find in the arms of men the kind of deep, unconditional love, worth, affirmation and acceptance that only I can give you.

You will never be married well unless Jesus Christ is the primary Spouse of your heart and of your soul. And you will never be single well unless Jesus Christ is the primary Spouse of your heart and of your soul—unless his love is the most important thing in your life.

Look to the spousal love of Jesus, because only then will you be in a position to resist the danger of the deadly sin of lust, of sexual idolatry—and all the more so in this hypersexual age that we live in. The more we look to the spousal love of Jesus, the more our sexuality—whether we’re single or married— will become a pointer to our ultimate and eternal relationship with him.

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As we prepare our hearts now for communion, I want to let you know that we have prepared a resource sheet for you or anyone you know who struggles with sexual sin and needs help. Among other things, the sheet includes resources for parents of children and youth, it includes a list of Christian therapists who specialize in helping people with sexual addictions, as well as some technology and accountability supports to help you resist the

¹⁵ Revelation 22:17

¹⁶ See John 4:1-42

temptation of internet pornography. You can download the sheet online, and we also have some printed copies available at the Welcome Desk in the lobby.

As we prepare our hearts now for the Lord's Supper be encouraged by God's word in Romans, which says:

So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus.¹⁷

Maybe you've struggled, as so many of us have, with lust, with sexual idolatry in one form or another. Know that Jesus' body was broken, and his blood was shed, that that you could be forgiven from all sin, and freed from all condemnation.

If you come away from today's message feeling condemned and hopeless because of sexual sin in your life, know that such condemnation is not coming from God. It's coming from the enemy, Satan, who the Bible refers to again and again as *the accuser*.

If, on the other hand, you come away from this message feeling convicted about your sexual sin, but loved and accepted by God at the same time— and the bread and the cup are emblems of God's sacrificial, unconditional, and infinite love for you— then that would be the Holy Spirit working in your life. If you feel hopeful that rooted in God's love for you in Jesus, you'll be able to take measures—even drastic ones, if necessary—to root out sexual sin from your life— then that would be the Holy Spirit.

Condemnation comes from the enemy, and it makes you want to run away God. Conviction comes from the Holy Spirit, and it makes you want to run into God's loving arms, where you'll find the power to change.

Indeed, Jesus invites you to come to him today, to his table. He is the bridegroom, and we are his bride, his church. Let him feed you today with himself— because he is what your heart is ultimately hungry for.

Communion

¹⁷ Romans 8:1 (NLT)