

Seven Deadly Sins: Lust

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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2 Samuel 13:1-19

Let me remind you of the image I've used for these seven deadly sins over the last couple of weeks. These deadly sins are disordered loves. These deadly sins are loves that have been twisted out of shape. God made us to be creatures who love – we love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and we love our neighbors as ourselves. Love is a kind of circulatory system that is meant to flow freely among us. But these seven deadly sins are like blockages in the arteries of love, and that makes them very dangerous. Today's blockage is the deadly sin of lust. Lust is not our favorite sin to talk about. When we planned the sermon series, this sermon was the hot potato. No one wanted it. Most ministers look forward to preaching on lust about as much as parents look forward to having 'the talk' with their 9-year-old child. We must change this. We Christians must find a way to talk about lust and or sexual desires, because lust is a problem for all of us. We have all struggled with this sin, we all have moments where lust flares up in us, we all struggle with lustful images and fantasies that pop up in our imaginations once in a while, and I daresay that lust has led us all, at one time or another, to make some bad choices. We have to find a way to talk about lust and sexuality, because to keep embarrassed silence is to surrender territory to the devil.

And we mustn't surrender this territory to the devil because this territory belongs to God! Sex is good, it is a gift of God, and it should be enjoyed by Christians without reservation and without embarrassment. Sex is a gift of God and God has a threefold purpose for sex. *Sexuality is made to create intimacy.* Any romantic physical expression between two people - whether that expression is hand holding or a hug or kissing is meant to express the level of Spiritual intimacy between two people. The intimacy comes first and these physical expressions both expresses and grows that intimacy. *Sexuality is made to create life.* In its full expression the sexuality that creates intimacy can also create a human life. That's a brilliant design on God's part. Because babies need the context of deep intimacy to thrive. Babies need intimacy like plants need sunlight. *Finally, Sexuality is made for enjoyment.* It is meant to be one of the things that gives life color and spice. So intimacy, life and enjoyment...these three things are meant to work together. Lust distorts love's proper function because it strips away the intimacy part of sexuality and the life-giving part of sexuality; all love wants is the spice. Lust throws out the intimacy and the life and grabs the pleasure. Then it inflates that pleasure part until it becomes a kind of obsession.

This is exactly what we see Amnon doing in our passage. Amnon is overcome with lust for Tamar. He's so infatuated he feels physically sick. He looks haggard. He is so infatuated he seems to abandon all reason and all sense. He works himself into this state. First, he strips away intimacy. He over powers Tamar. He grabs what he wants. There is no intimacy. The life-giving part of sexuality is also stripped away. There is no thought of family. He won't listen to Tamar's offer of something more like marriage. He's just hungry. And finally Amnon feeds his lust by adding on more thing. Did you notice what that was? Visuals. Did you notice how the text emphasizes that Amnon wanted Tamar to prepare food 'in his sight?' "Let her prepare the food in my sight." Literally "before my eyes." Three times the passage tells us that Tamar prepares the food before his eyes. It's in Verse 5, verse 6, and verse 8. Why do you think Amnon wanted to

make the food in his presence rather than off in a kitchen somewhere? He was feeding his lust with visual spectacle. And you thought pornography was a modern phenomenon. Already then, people were using visual stimulation to feed their lust.

And now today, we have whole industries feeding this deadly sin. They are the pornography industry and the romance industry. We are massively exposed to both, and they both twist love out of its proper shape. Just this month there was a big article in the New York Times Magazine entitled, *What Teenagers are Learning from Online Porn*. The author visited institutions that were studying how exposure to porn affected the perceptions of adolescents. There was the effect you'd expect: it increased their obsession with sexuality. But worse than that, porn distorts young people's understandings about how they are supposed to behave in romantic relationships. You see, porn has its own mythology and the young people's understandings were corrupted by that mythology. In the mythology, men are not gentle or shy or uncertain; they are muscular, aggressive and forceful. In the mythology of porn, women are always available and happily willing to submit to all sorts of degrading practices. What happens to the real life sexuality of men and women who take in this mythology day after day after day? A young man feels like he needs to be aggressive and forceful and uber-confident. If he feels anything else, he's a poor partner. He's less than a man. A young woman thinks she has to submit to all this degrading stuff and pretend to enjoy it. If she doesn't, she's a poor partner and men won't want her. This is exactly what's happening to real young people in real relationships. Read the article and you see these young people are trying to live out what they see on the screen and then they can't figure out why they feel unhappy, unfulfilled and lonely.

It's not just the mythology of porn that's messing people up; it's also the mythology of romance. Young women and young men are drawn into the world of romance novels and – I'm going to say it – shows like the Bachelor. They enter a world where everyone is beautiful and everyone is smooth. They enter a world where your suitor is a smooth talking race car driver named Arie with broad shoulders, piercing eyes and flowing hair. They enter a world of rose-petaled rooms where the man knows just when to move in for the first kiss, and he holds the girl in just the right way and when their lips meet... it's electric. That's the mythology. But then a young girl meets a guy and he's kind, but kind of awkward too. He has some acne and knobby knees. And when they kiss it's nervous and awkward and there is no electricity, his mouth is dry, and both of them feel awkward afterwards and they spend the rest of the evening trying to figure out what that kiss meant. But because of the romance mythology they don't realize this is completely normal! This is how it goes! We are not smooth! We don't sweep each other off our feet; we stumble our way toward intimacy. Real human sexuality, the kind that builds intimacy, the kind that can lead properly to the context of the full expression of love in a marriage, is full of awkwardness, uncertainty, missteps, and apologies. It is a joyful, and fearful coming together between two imperfect people, and it takes all of the fruit of the Spirit to make the journey together.

So lust distorts our sexuality, and this distortion leads to disappointment. Verse 15. Wow. So sad, so powerful, and so true to life. As soon as he's finished with Tamar, Amnon goes from overwhelming desire for Tamar, to hatred. "In fact he hated her more than he loved her." Why does he hate her all of a sudden? I'm guessing it's because the experience didn't live up to its promise. Lust makes you believe that the encounter will be this unbelievable, transporting, experience, and when it's not, when it's ordinary, when it's disappointing, when there are tears instead of ecstasy, the anger gets directed against the object of the lust. I think Amnon hates Tamar and tells her to get out because she reminds him of his own emptiness. In other words, his

sin does the opposite of what our sexuality is supposed to do: instead of creating intimacy, it makes Amnon hate both Tamar and himself. This is real too. A college male who has a drunken encounter with some female he barely knows at a party. The whole thing makes him feel embarrassed. As soon as it's over they slink away from each other, barely speaking. He spends the rest of the week following trying to avoid her on campus. Treating her like she doesn't exist. He doesn't tell her to get up and get out like Amnon, but it amounts to the same thing.

So lust distorts, lust disappoints; it also dehumanizes. Did you notice how Amnon refers to Tamar after the encounter? He won't say her name. He tells his servant, get 'this woman' out of my sight. "This woman." In Hebrew it's "Et-Zoat!" which doesn't really use the word woman. It's derogatory. It's a term of contempt. One translator has Amnon saying, "Get this *thing* out of my sight." Lust dehumanizes the other. In fact lust *needs* to dehumanize the other. Lust doesn't work when the other person is fully human. That's why exotic dancers always have fake stage names. You would never have a dancer use her real name. Why not? Because that gets in the way of objectification that lust needs. A man leering at an exotic dancer doesn't want to know her real name. A great way to empty out these clubs would be to stand up before a dancer was about to come on and say, "This is Sultry Susan, but her real name is Mary Wallinski. She has four brothers and sisters. Her parents divorced when she was 5. Her mother is an alcoholic. She has been married twice, her last husband beat her. She has two kids and is struggling to get by. She likes dogs and would love to be a dental hygienist someday." That would empty out the room. An introduction like that would short circuit the lust because it would put intimacy and humanity back into the picture. Lust doesn't want the full humanity of the person with her needs and her vulnerabilities. Lust wants low lights, a haze of alcohol and lots of lies.

So lust distorts, disappoints and de-humanizes, but in this story lust doesn't just de-humanize, it leads to death. It kills. The destructive power of lust goes way beyond the pain of this encounter, in this story, this rape creates a rift in David's family. Tamar's brother Absalom is filled with anger. His anger eventually leads him to murder Amnon, which in turn leads to civil war in Israel. Thousands of people are killed! This act of lust has huge social implications. This too is true to real life. When I think what porn has done to families; when I think of those teenagers so confused by porn they don't know how to connect anymore. When I think of the damage lust has done to the trust between men and women in this 'me too' world of Harvey Weinstein and Roger Ayles, when we see the pain on the faces of Larry Nasser's victims, I think it is pretty clear that this sexual distortion is literally tearing society apart.

It is so important to the flow of love in this world that we handle the gift of sexuality properly. You can see it even on the smallest scale. A couple of 8th graders go to a movie together and one of them, with his heart pounding, reaches out to make a small romantic gesture – maybe takes the other's hand. That is such an important moment. What's happening in that moment? Something like this: one person is holding out his vulnerability to the other. To make a romantic gesture is to take something frail, something you've held concealed and make it known. 'Here I am. This is me. Me with my uncertainties and my rough edges. Me with my hopes and my loves. This is me, and I am opening myself up to you, trusting you, hoping to make a connection with you.' It's such a beautiful and important moment. If that small offering of vulnerability is devoured, or exploited, or manipulated, terrible damage is done, damage that goes down to the center of who we are and how we love. But if, on the other hand, that small gift of the other person's vulnerability is received in love and reciprocated by the other person, if the other person responds by sharing the gift of their own vulnerable self, something strong and good can start. And if the two people continue in that pattern of sharing, and that sharing is nurtured

by the fruit of the Spirit, with gentleness and kindness and patience and prayer, and if that small exchange of vulnerabilities grows before the face of Jesus and becomes the full exchange of vulnerability that takes place between two people in marriage... well then... something strong and life giving has been planted by God in the middle of the world by the power of his grace. It's such a beautiful and such a delicate gift God has given us.

I need to say one more thing. There are probably a number of folks here for whom this whole topic of lust brings feelings of guilt and discouragement. You have struggled with lust and have lost. You can't seem to stop the feelings or turn off the thoughts. You've done things that can't be undone and the guilt is piling up. I want to say to anyone here like that, 'Don't despair.' Don't give up fighting this sin and don't give up on yourself. C.S. Lewis says it best: "If you are a poor creature, saddled by some sexual perversion, nagged day in and day out by an inferiority complex - do not despair. He knows all about it. He knows what a wretched vehicle you are trying to drive. Keep on. Do what you can. One day (perhaps in another world, but perhaps far sooner than that) he will fling your old vehicle on the scrap heap and give you a new one. And then you may astonish us all - not least yourself; for you have learned you're driving in a hard school." If you are struggling with lust, keep fighting. You may not feel like master of this sin. But be assured God is the master of it. You may not feel like you can beat it; but on the cross Jesus has already beaten it. Keep bringing your broken self to the cross and let Jesus wash you clean. Because the day will come, the day must come, when lust and all the other daily sins that torment us will be laid aside and we will remember them no more. Thanks be to God.

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