

“Lust or Purity?”

September 6, 2015

Sinning like a Christian: The Good News series

Lust - probably the one of the seven that most of us are most interested in. As one of our church members said, there are two kinds of people. One kind who will admit that they have lusted. And the other kind who will lie. My guess is that's pretty spot on.

If it wasn't true, then we wouldn't see TV shows that are centered around lust. Pornography wouldn't be such big business. Human trafficking, including sex trafficking, wouldn't be a reality. We wouldn't hear about Ashley Madison whose tagline is “Life is short. Have an affair.” We wouldn't see the destruction of relationships.

We are a sex-saturated culture. And sex is a good gift of God meant to be shared in covenant and commitment. But we struggle to view it that way. Instead, we're in a time when sex, or probably more correctly, lust, is the focus for many people. We can do whatever we want with no consequences.

We objectify each other - looking at each other as “things” rather than people who are created and beloved of God. Desire and instant gratification, no strings attached, getting what we want when we want it - that's where we land and call it “love.” But as we read, “The desire of lust is to get. The desire of love is to give.”

That's a powerful summary of it. Jesus' words are real - even harsh. Maybe he realized the slippery slope that we're on. And I want to be clear that when we talk about purity, I'm talking about purity of heart as well as anything else. We can sit here and feel good about what we haven't done. But what about our hearts?

Jesus makes it clear in the blessings: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” There's a connection there. When we're seeking God first, then we come to an understanding of what love really is. It is self-giving. It sacrifices for the someone else. Love doesn't insist on its own way. As William White says, “Love endures all things; lust endures very little.”

Like gluttony, lust has to do with being preoccupied and always focused on matters of the flesh. And just like with gluttony, we have to talk about self-control and making boundaries that honor ourselves and honor those we love. Again, sex is a good gift of God, but when it's all about our own needs and forgetting God's role as the giver of that good gift, then we lose the opportunity to grow in love.

Frederick Buechner says, “Lust is the craving for salt of a person who is dying of thirst.” Lust promises momentary satisfaction, but it doesn't lead to anything of

significance. Lust promises a lot, but doesn't really deliver. Remember that list of three "Things God Has Never Seen":

1. A person God doesn't love
2. A situation God can't help
3. A substitute for God's son Jesus Christ - sex, drugs, money, etc.

Jesus explains what it means that he has come – not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill the Law. He doesn't come to do away with the Law that has led God's people for so many years. He seeks to deepen our understanding of the Law. In the process, he offers standards for living in the Kingdom of God.

Two important things to note here. First, Jesus is concerned with our intentions, our motivation, and our attitude behind our actions. Yes, following God's commands is important, but why do we follow God's commands? Is it to avoid breaking the law, avoid punishment – or do we act from a place of truly seeking to live a holy life? There's a difference!

Second, it's clear that these expectations have everything to do with how we live in relationship to one another – how we live in community. And how we live with each other is tied to our relationship with God. How we live together – how we choose to treat one another – has everything to do with how we can nurture our relationship with God.

Jesus takes on adultery and with it, lust. He calls us to consider the deeper issue of loyalty as it concerns relationships. It's not just the act of adultery that's problematic; it's anything that violates the sanctity of marriage, even thoughts.

Probably more than any of the rest of the seven, we consider lust to be a "private" sin. It's secretive. It doesn't really hurt anyone else, right? But lust is both personal and relational. It matters in our relationship with others. It matters in our relationship with God. God is Creator, and God invites us to give him all of ourselves - physical, emotional, and spiritual. God calls us to celebrate sexuality as a good gift and honor it in our lives.

And Scripture gives us both ends of the spectrum. Song of Solomon is a love poem. Some of us might even consider it too detailed, but it offers us a picture of what God intends - that sexuality is good and can be celebrated. King David is one example of lust - II Samuel.

Before Jimmy Carter was president, he gave an interview to Playboy in November of 1976 where he talked about how his Christian faith informed his life. He said:

"I try not to commit a deliberate sin. I recognize that I'm going to do it anyhow, because I'm human and I'm tempted. And Christ set some almost impossible standards for us.

Christ said, 'I tell you that anyone who looks on a woman with lust has in his heart already committed adultery.'

"I've looked on a lot of women with lust. I've committed adultery in my heart many times. This is something that God recognizes I will do--and I have done it--and God forgives me for it."

Carter's confession was a big deal and continues to be something that's remembered about him.

So, to live in the Kingdom means to practice self-denial and self-control. It's not enough to avoid committing adultery; we have to focus on our motivations and the potential actions from them. Honor the covenant totally – with body, mind, and spirit. Jesus calls all of us – regardless of marital status – to consider what it means to honor God's good gift of sexuality in our lives. Will Willimon says, "How countercultural it is for the church to assert that all of life, even our sexual life, is to be lived for the glory of God and the good of our neighbor."

Friends, Jesus calls us to make a choice about how we will live. Will we live in the Kingdom? It's possible, but it takes work: **HARD WORK** that demands our commitment to make changes and sacrifices for the sake of our faith in Jesus Christ. It takes work: **HEART WORK** that demands self-examination over and over again, day after day after day. God is concerned with the whole of our lives – how we act and interact in our relationships. God is concerned with our motivations, intentions, and attitudes.

It's not about just doing the right thing; it's about doing the right thing for the right reason – because we love and serve a God who saves us in Jesus Christ. We can't do whatever we want and ignore Jesus. We seek to meet these expectations, but we fail. We've already failed this morning, and the day's not half over! We struggle with lust. We want to measure up, but we know we need forgiveness. Most of all, we realize we need Jesus even more.

So we find ourselves back where we started. Let's be honest: we sin. We need God's help to repent, to turn back to God, and to live more holy, more healthy lives. Jesus' words guide us in how we act, but it's not just a moral code or a guide to ethics. He offers us the Kingdom of God, and we have the opportunity to live in the Kingdom. He reveals God's desire for us – don't just act based on whatever the world's expectations are, but act out of who you are because you are mine.

The reality is that we are sinners seeking to be more holy. The Good News is that Jesus died for sinners. And the good news is that God calls us together to seek God's way together. God cares for you - for me - and wants to know that we know that. That means that we confess our sin before God and each other. We're not alone.

So that's where we are today as we come to the table...