

SEXUALITY AND LOVE

LESSON 3: WHAT SCRIPTURE TEACHES ABOUT LUST

Main Idea: To secular eyes, one of the most unattractive elements of Christianity is its view of sex. This lesson looks beneath the surface and helps you get a better grasp on the Christian view of sex.



SIGHTLINE: Acquire Your Target

Jesus spoke some famous words about sexual sin in what came to be known as the Sermon on the Mount that are recorded in Matthew 5:27-30:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one

of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.”

Jesus is saying, “You don’t recognize the power that sexual sin has. You don’t respect it enough.” People roll their eyes at the idea of going to hell for lust. Although Jesus had a lot of words He could have used for hell, He chose the word *Gehenna*. This was the name of a garbage dump outside of Jerusalem, also known as the Valley of Hinnom. It was the place where things that were rotting and decaying were thrown and burned.

Jesus is saying, “Unless you learn to get a handle on sex—it is so mysterious, so awesome, so unique—it is going to spread all sorts of decay and destruction in your life. Your whole life is going to break apart. It’ll set you on fire. Things will fall apart. This is serious.” The reason we have these problems is because we don’t see what sex really is.

The Bible is very straightforward about lust. Jesus says unless you get it under control, it will spread like fire across your life. Part of the problem people have with the biblical ethic of sex is they don’t understand what God’s Word actually says. Let’s begin by discussing what lust is not.

In Matthew 5 when Jesus says, “Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart,” what does *look lustfully* mean? Jesus’ choice of words is very important. He could have chosen plenty of words that mean *sexual desire*, but He doesn’t use any of them here. The reason why is that the Bible does not define lust as sexual desire. They are not the same thing. In fact, the Bible’s attitude towards sex and sexual desire is one of such unashamed celebration and enthusiasm.

Genesis 1 records that God created males and females as sexual beings, and He called them good. In the first chapter of the Bible, God invents sex and gives a benediction over it. In Genesis 2, God brings Eve to Adam. Verse 23 says, “The man said, ‘This is now bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.’” Adam is naked, singing rapturous songs of love to naked Eve in the presence of God.

Martin Luther has a fascinating perspective on the body. He says that the biblical view of the body is utterly positive, pointing out that Jesus Christ had a body, but the devil does not. The most perfect Being in the universe had a human body. But the most imperfect, evil being has no body. The idea that the



body is somehow sinful and drags us down is nonbiblical nonsense. The Bible rejoices in the body.

The Old Testament book Song of Solomon is an extended love song, a celebration of sexual love between a husband and a wife. In chapter 7, the husband is looking at his wife, who is approaching him for sex. He's looking at her naked body and says in verses 7 and 8, "Your stature is like a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters. I say I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its fruit. Oh may your breasts be like clusters of the vine, and the scent of your breath like apples." These are vivid statements of a man singing for joy about taking hold of his wife's breasts.

Chapter 5 of Song of Solomon is a song from the wife looking at her husband as he approaches her sexually. She describes him as radiant and ruddy, outstanding among ten thousand, with arms like gold rods set with topaz and a body like polished ivory. She claims his mouth is sweetness itself and declares him altogether lovely—her beloved, her friend.

The Early Church was countercultural, strikingly different than the pagan culture around it in two primary ways. Pagan society was stingy with its money and promiscuous with its body. Pagans gave practically no money away, but freely gave away their bodies—a very common trait. In contrast, the early Christians did not freely give away their bodies, because they believed sex was exclusively for marriage. However, they gave almost everybody their money. They were generous with their money and self-controlled with their bodies—the exact opposite of pagans.

Historians will tell you that this is one of the reasons Christianity spread like crazy in the early centuries. Think about it: which of the two approaches to money and sex is more likely to create good neighborhoods? Which is more likely to build a stronger, more stable society? Which of the two kinds of societies would kids want to grow up?

The Bible is not shy about sexual desire. In fact, Paul commands husbands and wives to have regular and frequent sexual intercourse (1 Corinthians 7:3-5). The Bible does say that if you just follow your passions wherever they lead you, you are not respecting the power of sex, and you have too low a view of it. On the other hand, if you're prudish—you tend to believe sex is defiling or dirty—you are likewise failing to respect its sacredness. Therefore, you have too low a view of sex. Both the prudish and the pagan hold too low a view of sex.



Jesus doesn't squelch your passions. He has every opportunity in the Matthew 5 passage to do just that, but He doesn't, because the Bible does not equate lust with sexual desire. Furthermore, the Bible presents a positive view of sexual desire: God invented it. While the Bible neither says to squelch your passions nor to follow them unequivocally, it does say to channel them. Which leads us to what lust actually is.

The Bible defines lust in two ways. The first one is that **lust is impersonal desire**. Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." To paraphrase, He is saying, "If you want sex with someone to whom you are not married, if you want to be physically naked with someone with whom you are not also personally, legally, and economically naked and vulnerable, then you are bringing into your soul something that will lead to its disintegration. There will be fire. You will fall apart."

Sometimes people will ask why the Bible doesn't just clearly say, "Don't have sex before you're married." It is helpful here to understand that the idea of premarital sex was so outrageous in ancient cultures that the penalty was often death. Even today, certain fundamentalist religious cultures still take this approach.

However, the Bible does clearly command people not to engage in premarital sex. While a detailed discussion of the topic is beyond the scope of this lesson, it is helpful to understand such commands in Scripture use a common Greek word *porneia*, which gets translated into the rather archaic word *fornication*. This basically includes any sexual act outside of marriage. Married people commit *adultery*, and single people commit *fornication*. At the end of the day, it is all sin, and it all brings disintegration.

Furthermore, while history is not a replacement for Scripture, it's informative to note that every single major religion in the world has taught for centuries that sex outside of marriage is wrong, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Only since the last half of the twentieth century has secularism decreed otherwise.

The issue of our sexuality goes back to how we were created. God designed our sexuality. Even though we can use it however we want, we cannot avoid the consequences of misuse because we didn't design it. I own my car. As owner, I am free to fill it with chocolate sauce instead of oil. But I didn't design the car, so I'm going to encounter a lot of problems if I do.



The Bible teaches that **sex is an integrative act**. If you say to someone, “I want to have sex with you, but I don’t want to marry you,” what you are saying is, “I want to be independent; I want to keep my options open. I want to keep control of my life. I don’t want to give myself to you personally.” This is a separation of body and soul, and our sexuality is not designed to work that way.

The second biblical definition of lust is that **it is inordinate desire**. The word Jesus uses for *lust* is one that is almost never used for sex. Out of sixty-two times that the word lust is used in the New Testament, it only refers to sex *twice*. The word is *epithumea*, and it means *an inordinate desire, an excessive desire*. It most often refers to idolatry. It means to try to get something from an object or person that you can only get from God. If that is Jesus’ definition of lust, it explains a lot. No wonder we’re willing to die for this *appetite*. No wonder men and women are willing to throw away families and careers in an attempt to satisfy their lust. No wonder we’re so driven by it that we’ve got to have it no matter what—because, Jesus says, we’re trying to get something out of sex that only God can give.

If you are married and that’s your view, there will be problems in your marriage because of it. If you’re not married, this may be a reason why. You may be looking for a perfect woman out there who doesn’t exist. Until God is the lover of your soul, you will not be fit to be the lover of anybody else because you will remain trapped in the illusion that you can get out of romantic love that which can only be given by God.





CROSSHAIR: Focus on Your Target

Our culture is quite conflicted about sex. A common view is that the affirmation of sex between any two consenting adults is necessary for intellectual and emotional health. Furthermore, unless you share that view, you are not enlightened—you're not even grown up. However, a growing number of secular researchers who have studied the sexual freedom that started with the Baby Boomer generation are now concluding that it has resulted in all kinds of brokenness, from family structure to mental health to physical health and disease. Sexual freedom literally kills people. And ironically, this destruction and brokenness happens not because the world has too high a view of sex, but because it has too low a view.

It's no accident that Jesus said to tear out an eye or cut off a hand (Matthew 5:29-30). He was speaking figuratively. The eye represents how you view things. Overcoming the sin of lust cannot happen through willpower alone. You can't just say, "I won't, I won't, I won't." That'll never work. First, you must change your viewpoint to see sex for what it is. A proper Christian sex ethic always comes from the positive, not the negative. In addition, you have to understand the truth about lust. A person in the grip of lust is like a man dying of thirst trying to quench it with potato chips.

If the eye lets us see stuff, the hand lets us do stuff. Jesus' mention of the hand indicates the need to behave wisely. One way this plays out in a believer's life is taking care to avoid places and activities that tempt them to lust.

If you only work on your behavior and not your thinking, you're going to fail. On the other hand, if you only work on your thinking and don't take yourself out of the way of temptation, you're going to fail too. Tear out the eye and cut off the hand, or the fire will spread to everything.

Sexual desire is far more powerful than just an appetite, and it will spread like a fire in your life unless you learn to deal with it. People mistakenly think they can control their sexual urges on their own. But look at today's cultural emphasis on external beauty—how it drives us, particularly impacting women. Culture constantly bombards them with messages about beauty standards. Men are not immune to the effects of this overvaluing of outward sexual attractiveness. More men are addicted to porn today than ten years ago. This



is not just another appetite. It's not just another part of life. And we are not in control of it.

Sex is a way for you to demonstrate to your wife that you belong to her and she to you. It is a way to say, "You are not your own and I'm not my own; we are one." In fact, when a man and woman get married, they are joined together as one in a deeper way than just physically. Being "one" in marriage is not merely an abstract idea. It is a holy, spiritual reality. Sex is both a sign of that union and a means of achieving it. And in the context of marriage, it is utterly personal and holistic in every way. Can you see how different this is from lust's impersonal expression?

Many men think sex will heal them. Finally, they'll be somebody, and their insecurities will vanish. But sex (and sexual desire) is actually a signpost on a man's spiritual journey, not the destination. As a signpost, sex points to something beyond itself. It points you onward, to God who is the true healer.

Jesus Christ calls himself the *bridegroom* several times in Scripture. What an amazing statement. Of course, Jesus is also our King, but if He's only our King, then our only relationship to Him is as subjects. If you obey a king or queen, they may accept you as a good subject, but nothing more personal.

But as our bridegroom, Jesus is the intensely personal lover of our souls. He gives us the gift of His presence, not because He finds us obedient as His subjects, but because He finds us beautiful and valuable. Do you believe God sees you this way? Unless you do, Jesus might be your king, He might be your example, He might be your teacher, He might be all kinds of things, but He won't be your soul lover.

To the degree you experience Christ as the personal lover of your soul, you will find healing in sexual matters. If you are married, you will no longer crush your wife under your expectations of her. If you're single, you will no longer crush yourself futilely trying to satisfy your needs and desires on your own, because you turn them over to Him to take care of. Only Jesus can ultimately satisfy us, because only He was ever fully vulnerable with us, stripped naked on the cross. Only Jesus is completely committed to you and loves you perfectly. Jesus is the only One who can truthfully sing, "Longer than there've been stars up in the heavens, I've been in love with you."





BULLSEYE: Zero in on Your Target

1. Describe some ways you maintain sexual purity.
2. What thoughts come to your mind when you read Martin Luther's perspective of the body (pages 2-3)?
3. What thoughts come to mind when you read Song of Solomon 7:7-8?
4. How is lust an impersonal desire?
5. How is lust an inordinate desire?
6. Describe your understanding of Jesus' phrase "tear out" your eye and "cut" off your hand in your own words.
7. How is sex more powerful than just an appetite?

- Take some time to listen to the Lord about what you just studied. How did this study help deepen your love for God?

- As a result of your deepened love for God, how can you practically demonstrate the thought you experienced to your family and to others around you?



USING MY *FIREBIBLE*

Read the *FireBible* note, on Matthew 5:28.

- What are the two things Jesus condemned besides the act of adultery?

- Who has a responsibility to maintain sexual purity?

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®)
copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

