

## THE POISON OF FANTASY

### Selected Scriptures

2/12/2023

With Valentine's Day coming up this week, it's an appropriate time for us to remember that the two greatest commandments followers of Christ have been given are to love God and to love others. But rather than looking at a passage on *how* we are to love, as profitable as that would be, what I want us to consider this morning is something that is one of the most insidious and pernicious threats to our love for God and our love for others. What I am referring to is the poison of fantasy.

Now, the meanings of words are important. And I fully admit that in the English language the word "fantasy" does not necessarily refer to something sinful or sordid. I understand that. So, I'm letting you know up front that for the purposes of our sermon today, I'm going to use the word "fantasy" in a very narrow sense. When I use the term "fantasy" I am referring to the use of our imaginations to indulge sinful desires. Neither my thesaurus nor I are aware of any single English word that captures that idea precisely. But for brevity's sakes, the word "fantasy" seems as appropriate of a choice as any to use in that way.

So, let's think about that definition I just gave you: the use of our imaginations to indulge sinful desires. To start with, let me ask you, where did our ability to imagine come from? Who gave us the capacity to envision things that are beyond our actual, immediate experience? God did. Our imaginations were given to us by God. And it is one of many things that set human beings apart from the rest of creation.

And, although Scripture doesn't tell us directly why God created us with imaginations, it isn't hard to *imagine* why that would be so significant. Afterall, how could we relate to a God who is so far beyond us in every possible way without the use of imagination? How could we even start to comprehend His attributes of eternity, purity, holiness, omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, transcendence, immanence or immutability?

And what the record of God's interactions with mankind? How could we relate to the histories contained in Scripture – the stories of the saints who have come before us – without the ability to picture in our minds the times, places and circumstances in which those events took place?

How could we begin to understand Christ's parables without employing our ability to envision the symbolism used in those stories and transpose their meaning to areas of our own lives as Christ intended us to?

How could we comprehend the Gospel? How could we envision Christ's past work on the cross applied to our own circumstances in the here and now in a way that provides future hope for us in Heaven? How could we do any of those things without the use of our imaginations?

God has given us the ability to see beyond our current state to a brighter future that lies ahead in a way that engages our emotions and desires and shapes how we live today all for His glory!

In many ways, our imaginations are an aspect of our being created in God's image. For example, in His omniscience, God not only knows all things as they actually are, He also knows all things possible and what their outcomes would be. And so, our own ability to envision possibilities and be creative, to anticipate problems and plan for the future, is a very pale reflection of one of God's perfections.

Likewise, our ability to have empathy and compassion for others as Christ does relies on our use of imagination as we envision what it would be like to be in the other person's shoes.

Much of what it means to be human is inextricably tied to imagination. In fact, we use our imaginations so freely, and so frequently, that often we don't even realize we're doing it. And therein lies a great danger. If we are not careful, if we are not vigilant, we can easily stray into using our imaginations to indulge sinful desires.

Just as our imaginations can be used powerfully for our benefit and for God's glory, as with any good gift from God, our ability to dream can also be abused. Our imaginations can be used for evil and sin just as much as they can be used for good and for righteousness' sake. The book of **Proverbs** speaks of how the wicked plot and scheme, how they devise evil plans. Those are all references to the mis-use of imagination. So, we have to be careful about where we allow our thought-life to take us! Especially when it comes to the issue of lust and sexual fantasy, which is where I want us to focus our attention today. As we approach Valentine's Day, through which the culture around us celebrates and glorifies erotic love, we need to be warned against the poison of fantasy.

So, let me start by addressing two thoughts you might be having right now. First, if you are a parent with younger children present, I may be making you a bit nervous with this topic. You may be wondering, "Just how explicit is Chris going to get?" Well, let me assure you that I won't make any statements that are stronger than when I am quoting Scripture. And what Scripture has to say about the dangers of a sinful thought-life is spread throughout the Old and New Testaments with no one verse capturing everything we need to know. So, rather than exegeting one particular passage, we're going to look at several in our study today.

Secondly, you may be wondering, “Is fantasy really all that dangerous? Is it really that big a deal? I mean, if I’m not acting on it, what does it matter what goes on my thought-life? Well, let me share some verses up front that help us understand just how seriously God views what we do with our imaginations.

#### **Genesis 6:5**

*Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.*

The “*thoughts of the heart*” mentioned here is an allusion to man’s imagination – thoughts and plans spurred by his cravings and desires. And the judgement pronounced here was that it was *only evil continually!* And that judgement is what led God to pour out His wrath on mankind through the flood.

**Proverbs 12:8** tells us: *a man [...] of perverse mind will be despised.*

And **Isaiah 55:7** says: *Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man... his thoughts.*

**Jeremiah 4:14** adds: *Wash your heart from evil, O Jerusalem, that you may be saved. How long will your wicked thoughts lodge within you?*

In the New Testament, Paul describes the unrighteous in **Romans 1**. And in depicting their decline into sexual sin, he says that: *God gave them over to a depraved mind* (v. 28).

Similarly, in **Ephesians 2**, after describing the “*sons of disobedience*”, Paul says in **verse 3**: *Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.*

Finally, in **Mark 7:21-23** Jesus says:

*<sup>21</sup> For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, <sup>22</sup> deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. <sup>23</sup> All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man.*

Notice that, in that entire list of sins Jesus provides here, the very first mentioned is “*evil thoughts.*”

So, both the Old and New Testaments repeatedly warn us of the dangers and consequences of entertaining sin in our minds. And lest you think the sins of your imagination are somehow hidden from God, let me remind you that **1 Chronicles 28:9** says: *The LORD searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts.* And **Jeremiah 17:10** adds: *I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways.*

We are accountable to God not only for what we do, we are accountable for what we think. So, please, don't be permissive when it comes to your thought-life. Fantasizing about wicked things is no small matter. It truly is poison to the soul.

So, this morning I want us to consider **three ways that sinful fantasies impact a person who indulges them.**

And men, I am talking to you and to me. And I'm not asking you *if* you struggle in your thought-life. I'm asking how are you fighting that battle? Are you winning... or are you losing? Are you resisting... or are you collaborating with the enemy? The primary users of pornography are men. And pornography is simply a tool used to spur one's fantasies, where the individual imagines themselves engaging with the image they are viewing.

But ladies, I am speaking to you as well. Men are not the only abusers of fantasy... or pornography. One study found that 30% of all internet pornography users are women – 30%! Beyond that, there is the issue of romance novels targeted at women that similarly draw the reader into fantasy worlds that romanticize illicit relationships and sexual affairs portraying them in words rather than pictures. Even “chick-flick” movies, as they're typically referred to, which often romanticize sexual relationships outside the bounds of marriage are targeted primarily at a female audience.

The issue of fantasy is not restricted to one gender or the other. All of us need to be warned of its dangers. And please understand, when I mention the use of external materials such as pornography, romance novels or “chick-flicks”, I mention those only as examples of where the practice of fantasy can take us. But even if you are not indulging yourself with such things – and I pray you aren't – you still need to be warned, because the problem of fantasy is not limited to the use of such things. It's not a problem with what lies out there, but what takes place in here (heart) and in here (mind).

Which, by the way, is why cutting-off of access to explicit materials, though a necessary step in the right direction, is never enough. One of the most common reasons why people who are enslaved to pornography find it so hard to break the hold it has on them is because they focus on avoiding external pornographic images while continuing to feed their appetite for lust through mental images in their thought-life through fantasy. That is a practice that will always end in failure because it only deals with cleaning the outside of the cup, while the inside remains full of self-indulgence and wickedness (Mt 23:25; Lk 11:39). There can be no starvation of lust so long as a person continues feeding it through fantasy.

So, to bolster our resolve against such wrong uses of our imagination, let's consider now three ways sinful fantasies impact a person who indulges them. And then afterwards, we'll look at ways to fight this sin.

## 1. First and foremost, **FANTASIES DAMAGE OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.**

How so? Well, we've already said that God gave us our imaginations to be used for His glory. But as a result of the fall, we are tempted to use our imaginations in rebellious ways for our own glory. So, the very fact that we entertain prohibited imaginings is, in itself, an affront to God's authority over us and an abuse of the gift He has given us.

We would do well to remember what Christ said about the greatest commandment. He said: ***You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your what? With all your mind*** (Matt 22:37). Not with *part* of your mind, but with *all* of it. Every thought, every use of our imagination, is to be an expression of our love for God. But when we engage in fantasy, we use our imagination in a way that rejects God as god, and exalts ourselves in His place.

It's been said that no one fantasizes about being told "no." In our fantasies, we place ourselves at the center of a universe of our own making, our own invention. A world where *our* will is done on earth and in heaven. Whatever we want, we get. *We* have the ability to direct the course of events. *We* are in control. Everyone submits to *our* will. *We* are the one who is worshiped. *We* are the focus of love and adoration. *We* are the object of people's admiration and desire. People respond to us just as *we* want them to.

Our fantasies are founded on the heretical lie that we can create a better world than God can. Or at least a world that better suits our appetites, because it is a world that revolves around the satisfaction of our every craving and desire. By usurping the role of the one true God, our fantasies cultivate a wrong view of the Almighty one that is dishonoring and blasphemous.

In essence, we follow the lie of the serpent from **Genesis 3:4-5**. We imagine a world where we don't need God to tell us what's right and wrong. A world where we can decide good and evil for ourselves. A world where we don't need to submit to God. A world where we can *be* god.

In our fantasies, we construct our own imagined universe where no moral standards are imposed upon us. One where we can do or say anything we want without any consequence or repercussion. You see, in our fantasies, we not only reject God, we also reject His word by suppressing the truth in unrighteousness, imagining ourselves acting in ways that violate God's commands. When we engage in fantasy, we tacitly declare God's moral will to be illegitimate, and dismiss His commands as prudish and tyrannical constraints, rather than seeking to honor our Creator by living life as He designed it to be lived and trusting what He has declared to be right and good for us.

By indulging our fleshly cravings, fantasy trains our hearts to desire what God has said is wrong and harmful for us to have. Brothers and Sisters, that's not okay! We need to call that what it

is – that is wickedness! Such fantasies are nothing but sinful self-glorification. They are an insult to God.

The truth is, God has warned us in His Word against engaging in sinful fantasy for our good – as a protection to our souls. This is why Jesus warns us in **Matthew 5:28** that: *everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart*. Jesus says plainly that what takes place internally – in our hearts and our minds – matters. Lustful fantasy is sin, and Jesus says that engaging in such fantasy is deserving of punishment in hell. Clearly, fantasy is no insignificant or harmless matter. It is deadly! And so, God’s prohibitions are demonstrations of His love for us.

But what do our sinful fantasies say about God? They say He really isn’t good, really isn’t wise, really isn’t loving or kind... or He would give me a more satisfying life than the one I’ve got. Our fantasies say we would make a better god than God. They are nothing less than expressions of rebellion against Him.

By indulging fantasy... we become just like the ungodly who **2 Timothy 3** describes as *lovers of self* (v. 2)... and *lovers of pleasure, rather than lovers of God* (v.4). Engaging in fantasy is a violation of the Greatest Commandment to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind. And it is a violation of the second Great Commandment as well – to love our neighbor as ourself. That is our second point this morning.

## **2. FANTASIES DAMAGE OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS.**

One of the lies that fantasy tempts us to believe is that we can engage sinful thoughts without hurting anyone – that we can compartmentalize and contain our fantasy life, and keep it from effecting our real-world relationships. But the truth is, fantasies damage our relationships with others by twisting how we see and relate to people.

In **John 15:12** Jesus says: *This is My commandment, that you love one another just as I have loved you... just as!*

Well, how did Christ live out His love towards others? He prayed for them. He served them. He fed them. He sacrificed for them, putting their interests ahead of His own. That is the example we are commanded to follow. But where Christ calls us to love others by dying to self and giving of self for the welfare of others, fantasy views others as objects to be used for the gratification of our own fleshy desires.

Fantasy trains our hearts and minds for the exploitation and manipulation of other people. It conditions us to see others *not* as fellow image-bearers existing for God’s glory, but as play-things existing only for our pleasure.

There is no way around it – fantasy degrades and dishonors how we see other people. No one who habitually subjects their mind to sexual fantasy will be able to keep themselves from evaluating real people they come into contact with by their physical appeal and attraction. And how we think about people will inevitably impact how we relate to them.

You see, fantasy not only degrades people by objectifying them, it also establishes expectations that real-life, flesh-and-blood people can never live up to. Fantasy interactions have only one purpose, one goal – our pleasure. And in our fantasies, people are exactly as we want them to be. They never disappoint. But real-world people and real-world relationships are more complex than that. They often don't go as we want. In the real world, we can be hurt, disappointed, irritated, frustrated. That's part of the allure of fantasy. It serves as an escape from the challenges of the real world.

But that escape becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy, where the more a person engages in fantasy, the more their discontentment with real people and real relationships grows. We were created for community. We not only need real people in our lives, but God actually uses the difficulties and disappointments of real relationships to grow us in our ability to love others as He does.

To become like Christ, we need to learn to love with forgiveness, and patience, and forbearance. We can't develop those qualities in a fantasy world where such characteristics are never needed! We only learn to love that way in real life. But fantasy stunts that growth.

When I was growing up in the late 70's and early 80's, there was a TV show called "Fantasy Island." Yes folks... I'm really going there. I'm actually going to use "Fantasy Island" in a sermon. Now, if you are unfamiliar with the show (consider yourself blessed) the premise was that there existed this resort island where people would go where they could live out their deepest fantasy.

*If there was anything* redeemable about that show, it was that no one's fantasy ever turned out the way the individual had imagined it would. And in the process of their stay on the island, each person came to better appreciate some aspect of their real-life (or, at least as "real" of a life as a fictional character on a TV show can have.)

The point is this: the appeal of fantasy is the pleasure it promises. But that promise can't survive in the real world. All it *can* do is rob us of the true satisfaction that God would have us enjoy in real-life relationships.

Fantasy is a violation of the two greatest commandments: (1) to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and (2) to love our neighbor as ourselves. But the damage fantasy does is not limited to our relationships with God and others, as horrible as that already is. Fantasies also damage US as well. That's our third point today.

### 3. FANTASIES DAMAGE US.

1 Peter 2:11 warns us:

*Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul.*

Peter describes the temptation of lust as a war for your soul. And where that war is first fought is on the battlefield of the mind. In order to indulge sinful fantasy, a person must first empty their mind of any thoughts of God. You see, any righteous thoughts of God's beauty, holiness, love, or wrath against sin will prick the conscience of the individual, hampering their ability to "relish" their sinful thoughts. And so, the person has to suppress the truth, pushing any thoughts of God out of their mind so they can "savor" their sin.

By the way, this is why Scripture memorization is such an effective weapon for fighting this battle. The more the mind is saturated with God's word, the harder it is to suppress the truth we know. Especially when Scripture is set to music. Songs with doctrinally-rich lyrics can be a great aid in fighting the battle for the mind.

But what happens when a person doesn't fight the lust of their flesh? What happens when they repeatedly, actively suppress righteous thoughts in lieu of sinful ones? Well, turn in your Bibles to Ephesians chapter 4. In **Ephesians 4** Paul describes the effect of sin on a person's thought-life, and how that ultimately leads to sinful behavior.

Follow along as I read **Ephesians 4** starting with **verse 17**...

***<sup>17</sup> So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk...***

Paul begins by telling believers that we are not to walk – that is, we're not to act, we're not to behave – like unbelievers act. Then he tells us what lies behind the way unbelievers behave.

***Walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk... in the futility of their mind,<sup>18</sup> being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart;<sup>19</sup> and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.***

Notice, the issue of behavior that Paul gets to in **verse 19** began in the mind of the unbeliever in **verse 18**. And "having become callous," they then acted out of their sinful mindset. When sinful thoughts are routinely entertained, the result is callousness.

When a person takes up learning the guitar, their fingers at first will hurt as they press the strings down on the frets of the instrument. There is a sensitivity that results in discomfort in the fingers. But over time, as the person continues to practice and play, they build up callouses



on their finger-tips – callouses that desensitize them to the discomfort they felt before. Well, fantasy has the same callousing effect on the conscience. It numbs us, hardens us, deadens us to the pangs of conscience that we used to feel, making it easier and easier to engage in fantasy without any stir of conviction, without any twinges of guilt or shame. Our fantasies train our hearts to long for wrong things, to hope for wrong things, to love wrong things. And Peter says, the reason people give themselves over to sinful acts is because what has gone on in their minds has made them calloused.

The fact of the matter is, sin is never satisfied to remain confined to our thoughts. It is always seeking ways to find expression. And so, our fantasies are often the rehearsal before the performance. We rehearse iniquity in our minds so many times that our conscience becomes dulled to the truth and desensitized to the wickedness of the sin that we've imagined committing. If we've trained our hearts to love sin in our thought-life, then, when the chance comes to act on our fantasy, well... we've made it a very small step from thought to deed.

I've counseled a number of men and women who have committed some terribly regrettable sins. Not one of them ever *thought* they would ever do what they did. That's not to say they couldn't *imagine* themselves committing that sin. Oh, they could imagine it. And they did – over and over again. The fact is, most of them had been fantasizing about their sin long before they acted on it.

**Proverbs 23:7** says: *For as a man thinks in his heart, so is he.* That means what you meditate on in your heart, what you dream about, what you fantasize about, is shaping the person that you are becoming. If you are dreaming about wrong things, it can lead to catastrophic consequences for your life. As the old saying goes, sin will take you further than we ever wanted to go, keep you longer than you ever wanted to stay, and cost you more than you ever wanted to pay.

**James 1:14-15** captures that downward spiral of lust when it says:

*<sup>14</sup> ...Each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. <sup>15</sup> Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.* James describes lust as being an internal activity of the heart and mind that eventually *gives birth* to sinful behavior, which has life-stealing consequences. This is why we have to take our thought-life seriously.

Now, my goal today was first... to alert us to the dangers of fantasy. But I don't want to leave this topic without pointing us in the direction of hope. So, if fantasy is poison, what's the antidote? Well, as we have already seen, the battle against fantasy is a battle for the mind. So, it isn't surprising that **Romans 12:2** tells us:

*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.*

That “*renewing of the mind*” that Paul points us to has both... a “put-off” and a “put-on” aspect to it. On the “put-off” side, wherever you are engaging in sinful fantasy, you need to name that for what it is – sin, and refuse to let that be a part of your thought-life any longer.

**2 Corinthians 10:5** talks about: *taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ*. That would include the use of our imaginations. We are to conform our *every* thought to Christ’s standard of righteousness. Now, let’s be realistic, can we control every thought that enters our minds? No, we can’t. Sometimes wicked thoughts pop into our heads and they’re there before we know it. But when I touched on this issue in Sunday school this past fall, I shared a helpful quote from Martin Luther, who said, “You can’t keep the birds from flying overhead, but you *can* keep them from building nests in your hair!” In other words, it’s one thing to have a stray thought enter your mind uninvited. It’s another to let it land there, to make itself at home there, without chasing it away.

Some of us need to admit we’ve been putting birdseed in our hair. Not only are we *not* resisting wicked thoughts, we’re inviting them in and entertaining them. Please don’t do that! Don’t be captivated by wicked thoughts, but take your thoughts captive and make them obedient to Christ!

Now, the *putting-off* of sinful fantasy is only half of what renewing the mind involves. The other half requires us to *put-on* right thinking. In particular, right thinking about God.

Turn in your Bibles to **Philippians chapter 4**. And as you’re turning there, let me ask you a question. Do you know what a great way to keep wicked thoughts out of your head is? Don’t leave any room for them. Look at what Paul says in **Philippians 4:8**:

***<sup>8</sup> Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.*** Fill your mind with what is holy and virtuous, and leave no room for entertaining sinful fantasy.

**Romans 8:5** encourages us to: *set our minds on the things of the Spirit*. And **Colossians 3:2** tells us to: *set our minds on things above*. Pre-occupy your mind with thoughts of God. And when sinful thoughts try to squeeze their way in the door of your mind, push them out with right thinking. As **Romans 13:14** states: *Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts*.

I mentioned before that when a person engages habitually in fantasy they dull their conscience. Well guess what... thankfully, the opposite is also true. The more we fill our minds with what is true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, of good repute, excellent and praiseworthy, it hones our conscience, it fortifies our convictions, and it builds our resolve.

Remember, God gave us our imaginations for our good, so that we could know Him. The way to defeat sinful fantasy is *not* to *stop* using our imaginations, but to redirect them to the things of God.

The very best way to love our sin *less* is to love God *more*. Christ taught us in **Matthew 6:24** that our hearts can only be devoted to one master at a time. So, the more we cultivate our affection for God, the more we will see anything that threatens of that love as ugly, vile, and repulsive.

Our imaginations are powerful. Yes, they can propel us towards sin, but they can help guard us from it, as well. So, use your imagination, but use it to honor the Lord by meditating on His glorious attributes! That is how we mortify fantasy and the deadly lust that drives it.

Now, renewing your mind takes work – it takes effort. And far too few people today are faithful to that labor. We need to remember that fighting sin, including the sin of fantasy, is commanded of us by God. That means we have a role to play – actions we must take. We cannot merely pray for God to "*take this sin from us.*" Such a prayer is a good start, but it must be *acted* upon in faith of God's promise to grow and to sanctify us *as we fight the good fight.*

Our faith of dependance upon God, as expressed in prayer, must be accompanied by the faith of obedience to God expressed in action as we strive to follow His commands, trusting Him to work through the means of sanctification He has provided to us. We must not presumptuously ride the waves of our cravings waiting for God to change our desires. That is essentially pushing the responsibility for our continued sin onto God, blaming Him for not taking away our wicked desires. **James 1:13** tells us: "**Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone.**" On the contrary, God has given us everything we need for life and godliness. He has given us the means to fight sin through prayer, meditation, confession and accountability.

And if you are a genuine follower of Christ, then I promise you – better, *Scripture* promises you – that as you actively battle sin in your life, God is at work in you to will and to do according to His good pleasure (Phil 2:13). What greater hope and encouragement could we ask for in our fight against sin than to know that God *is* working in us and that He *will* complete the good work He has begun in us?!

To whatever extent that fantasy has corrupted your thought-life, know that Christ stands ready to forgive you and to help you. Jesus died to cleans us from all sin, including the sins if the mind.

Fantasy damages our relationship with God, our relationships with others, and it damages us. The destruction it renders goes upward, outward, and inward. But the gospel work of Christ provides help and healing for all those things.

So, as we approach Valentine's Day, let's consider this: what a wonderful offering you can render to God, and what a wonderful gift you can render to others in giving a love made more pure by a mind that has been purged of fantasy.