

Deadly Sins and Life-Giving Virtues: Lust and Honor

Psalm 8:1-5 Galatians 5:13-25 Romans 12:9-11

Reminder: the 7 deadly sins are not deadly because we will die if we engage in them, or because God will smite us if we have these sins in our lives.

We **have** these sins in our lives. That's just something to admit.

And I suppose that's where the deadly part comes in. When we're *unwilling* to admit to God and to trusted others where we're struggling and where we need help. The deadliest sin is the one that remains hidden, kept in the dark. When we keep God at a distance, and others at a distance. And we miss out on experiencing the grace and love that God has for us.

So, as I've been saying, these sins are considered deadly because they are deadly to love, and they clog the flow of love into and out of our lives. And, there are things we can do, practices that we can engage, that open that flow.

This morning: lust. This will be rated PG, don't worry. Maybe PG-13!

Galatians 5:13-25

¹³You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters (he's talking about freedom from the Levitical laws of the OT; the old order of strict rules that you have to abide by, or else; in other words, in Christ, it's all grace and we live freely and in a spirit of love towards others); only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become servants to one another.¹⁴For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as

yourself.”¹⁵If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.¹⁶Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh (“flesh” doesn’t mean our literal physical body; it means that part of our nature which is opposed to God’s purposes).¹⁷For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want.¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law.¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness,²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions,²¹envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these (in other words, I could have gone on. Fun list, eh?).

²²By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness,²³gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.²⁴And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its (fleshly) desires.²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

Romans 12:9-10

9 Let love be genuine; run from what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.

This is the word of the Lord.

There is a book that was published in 1996 by Bill Bennet (former Secretary of Education in the mid-80’s) titled *The Book of Virtues*. It contains stories and moralisms about classic virtues, from classic writers. About a year after the *Book of Virtues* was published, a writer named Robert Hutchinson published *The Book of Vices*. It’s a humorous parody of the Book of Virtues, and he romps through

the 7 deadly sins using a collection of classic and contemporary literature. It's actually pretty good, if somewhat cheeky. And in his playful take on the 7 sins, he put lust first! At the very beginning of the book he quotes St. Augustine, who said, "O Lord, make me chaste. But not yet."

Before I go on, I'd like to give us one more reminder of something that is important about a study of the 7 deadly sins: when we talk about any or all of the 7 deadly sins, we're talking about a good desire that has gone to excess, or as become disordered in some way, which can lead to unhealthy behavior and harm to one's self or another person. So, with lust, we can say that lust by itself is not bad; how else would couples couple up? It becomes a problem when it becomes an obsession, or it begins to control a person in mind, or in behavior, which leads to dishonoring or depersonalizing another.

That said, lust is not the most serious sin—or the deadliest if we want to rank the sins that way. But it is perhaps the most intriguing. And often the most popular.

Let's pause for a moment, though, and think about this. We shouldn't be too surprised at this—it's nothing new, historically speaking. Human beings have always had an innate desire for transcendence; of getting outside ourselves; of having ourselves caught up in something greater than ourselves. And perhaps in

our modern time, sexual expression is one of our last experiences of true mystery. Almost like a sacrament—and there *is* something sacred and mysterious about it. Even the apostle Paul says that in the New Testament—in the context of marriage, specifically—that it’s a mystery, how the two become one.

There is obviously the selfish and self-indulgent aspect of lust and sex (and, hey, it’s enjoyable!), but the fascination with it over the course of history also reflects a search for meaning and transcendence.

Because underneath lust is something beautiful, and that is the desire for union—with... the God of our creation. Really! Not just union with another person, but with God, who created us and who desires relationship with us. Just read Song of Solomon, or Song of Songs or whatever we call it, in the Old Testament. It’s this erotic exchange of poetic song between two lovers, but it’s in the Bible because it’s an allegory: it represents this longing that God has for us, and the longing of the *human* heart for transcendence, something spiritual beyond ourselves. Not to mention that it obviously also celebrates the goodness and beauty of our sexuality, in poetic fashion. God created human beings and not only called us good, but *very good*. That includes our sexuality.

Yet, we beautiful and amazing human beings have struggled with this good desire. And while it is true that our society struggles with how to talk about and

express our human sexuality, and is, in places, consumeristic and self-indulgent, there is nothing new under the sun. Our culture is only one manifestation of a perennial phenomenon. It didn't take Sigmund Freud or Hugh Hefner to discover that lust is fun. Or Mae West, who famously said, "When I'm good, I'm very very good. But when I'm bad, I'm even better." That isn't just a modern thought. In the 15th century St. Teresa of Avila noted that "lust (the indulgent kind) is about the greatest form of sinful pleasures, and these absorb the mind more than any others."

And we can go all the way back to the beginning of the Bible and find lust and sexual expression gone awry from the very first pages (along with pride, and anger and envy and greed...).

So, the temptation to lust is not new.

Yet, when we turn to the spiritual masters—and Jesus himself—we find a surprising soberness about lust. There is a reason it made the list of the 7 deadly sins. Because God created us to be in loving, covenant relationships. And lust, gone to excess or disordered in some way, not only can damage relationships, it can degrade persons, whom God made in God's image—fearfully and wonderfully.

Quote from Hutchinson, pg. 15: "Modern technology masks all of the most natural of human experiences: wrinkles, disease, birth, death... and to some degree, sex itself. By reducing sex to a mere electronic spectator sport, by making it cinematic and scientific, we seem to think we've somehow conquered nature at last. In fact, all we have done is to remove our last enduring connection to who we really are." In other words, being human is good! In all its beauty and its messiness. But our humanity is diminished when we try to capture or consume and control (conquer, in his words) the human experience, rather than live in its reality, in God's gracious design.

One definition of lust is: to want the body of another person but not the person. One psychologist: lust is the desire to have control over another person for self-gratification. Any way we look at it or define it, lust depersonalizes. It depersonalizes the one who is lusted after, and it depersonalizes one's own self if they become obsessed with it. One becomes an object just as much as the other.

In a way, lust is consumerism, like we talked about last week.

In our reading from Galatians (verse 24) Paul says that those who live by the Spirit, who belong to God in Jesus Christ, have crucified the flesh with its fleshly desires. That sounds austere, and harsh!

But when Paul talks about crucifying desires, he simply means that we take them to the cross. We take them to the cross of Jesus, so that we can learn what self-giving looks like, and means, rather than self-gratification. It doesn't mean that we get rid of passion and desire altogether so we become automatons and robots, with as little emotion and passion as possible. The problem isn't that we want too much, or that we have too much desire. God isn't telling us not to want; God is inviting us to take our wants *to him*, and even... to *want God!* And that's when the deadly sins can become deadly, when we stop wanting God and we want only what *we* want, apart from God and sometimes at the expense of another. The problem with sin is when our wanting and our desires, even our good desires, become misplaced or misdirected.

God wants us to want him, because God wants us. And our mutual wanting will shape our desires in relation to each other, and in relation to the good things that God gives us on this earth. The more I read Scripture, the more I believe it's telling us to reach out to God with our affection. Reach out to *God* with desire.

St. Augustine—whom Hutchinson quoted—also once said that the man knocking on the door of the brothel is searching for God. Um, not really! He's obviously searching for something else at that moment. But what Augustine is

saying is that the desire that he's not aware of, the desire placed in him by his Creator, is the desire to have union with his Creator.

So, where does God's grace help come from with the challenge of lust? What is God's approach? (in addition to taking our desires and needs—our whole self—to the cross)

I'd like to take what may seem like a surprising approach, and talk about Christian community. We might think that the solution to lust is cold showers and getting rid of the tv or computer. Or, exercise more self-control. Well, good luck with that, if that's all we try to do!

The grace of help for *any or all* sin or struggle is in community.

This may surprise you, but one of the most oft repeated phrases in the New Testament is "one another." One another. So, let's talk about one-anothering for a moment, and we'll see how this applies to the 7 deadly sins.

In Romans 12:9-10 the apostle Paul says "let love be genuine (literally, 'unhypocritical;' authentic, real); love *one another* with mutual affection; outdo *one another* in showing honor." In Galatians it says the same thing: through love become servants to... *one another*." Biblical scholar Gordon Fee wrote a nice essay about "one anothering." One anothering as the great call to Christ's church, and the mark of the church.

One of the Biblical words associated with this is *honor*. To honor is to attribute value and worth. We heard it in Psalm 8, that God is not only mindful of us, but God has crowned us with honor! Value and worth! And this honoring of each other is given, in the New Testament, a way we can *think* about others, and *treat* others, in such a way that they are valued as precious children of God; made in God's image; artistic creations of the master painter, the master sculptor.

“Honor one another.”

The “one another” aspect of this is so important. Encouragement to be free from pride, envy, anger, lust—or any of the other works of the flesh that Paul mentions—through *one-anothering* is a nice way of reminding us that no one was ever meant to follow Jesus alone. This is not a solo journey. Life is too demanding to go it alone. We need help from trusted others.

We obviously need to live by the Spirit as we are each able, and be willing disciples and try to follow what Jesus teaches. But we can't do it all alone. Because no one *as an individual* can resist sin all the time. And God does not expect heroic individualism from us, but rather connection to a community of the Holy Spirit called the church, in whatever form a church may take. As detached and separate individuals we are no match for the wiles of the devil if we try to go it alone.

The ultimate “remedy for sin” (to use the old language) from a Christian point of view, is not tight-fisted moral determination to be a better person, or a cold shower to cool our passions. It’s our faithful inclusion in God’s kingdom, by which we are placed in a community that enables us to live as persons who are on a journey of faith, hope, and love. And, in honest open relationships, where people are accepted, loved, and encouraged in their journey. I like it that in some churches, or entire denominations, the Kingdom of God is referred to as the Kingdom. This reality of being kin, in Christ.

Paul in Galatians: through love, become servants to *one another*. The whole law is summed up in this, he says: love... *one another*. The answer to sin or struggle is love. And love happens, and is learned, in the context of community; authentic Christian community. Open, honest, sincere.

Here is a wonderful, and somewhat challenging word from the apostle James. It sounds lovely, but if we take a moment and think about it, it’s a challenge. He says (in James 5:16-f): “Confess your sins to *one another*... and pray for *one another*, so that you may be healed.” Here, again, we have a call to “one anothering!” Now, we love the prayer and healing part. The “confess your sins to one another part” can be intimidating and even frightening. Yet we all benefit from finding a community, even if it’s a two or three other people, with whom we

can be honest, and feel safe in opening up. “Wherever two are three are gathered,” Jesus said, “there will I be in their midst.”

And James says when we pray for one another we find healing. We often equate those lines with physical healing. And it can certainly be understood in that way. Yet the healing he is promising here is mainly the emotional, relational, and spiritual healing that follows honesty and transparency in community with one another. Where sin and struggle are brought out into the light, and we become priests to one another by praying for each other, pronouncing forgiveness over each other, and then walking with each other in relationships of honor and genuine love, in the kin-dom of God.

The Gift of Love