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LUST

SMOKE, FIRE, AND ASHES

Sex is sinful to the degree that, instead of drawing you closer to other human beings in their humanness, it unites bodies but leaves the lives inside them hungrier and more alone than before. —Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*

Sex: Is it the enemy, the forbidden fruit, the greatest and most shameful of all sins, or is it the key to happiness, the ultimate fulfillment of desire?¹ Is it a picture of our relationship with God, holy and pure, or a matter of casual weekend recreation? If marriage is truly good, why does most Christian radio broadcast only platonic love songs crooned to God, not to flesh-and-blood members of the opposite sex? If spring-break sexual free-for-alls and one-time hook-ups are premised on a notion of sex as just for fun, why do secular rock songs also extol a “hold me in your arms forever” view of sex that is linked to love and promises of lifelong exclusiveness? Does sex mean nothing or everything? Is it sacred or sinful? Is it for procreation, personal intimacy, or physical pleasure? Why is it so taboo we can’t talk about it? Why is it so ubiquitous that we see it broadcast everywhere? Needless to say, both the culture and the church are sending

mixed messages about sex—as if we needed confusion on top of the difficulty of handling sexual desire itself!

“Lord, give me chastity and continence . . . but not yet,” prays Augustine in his *Confessions*.² Make me holy, he implores God, but please don’t make me give up my unholy sexual gratifications, at least not today. When he finally wanted to give up his lustful ways, however, he found he couldn’t. He describes himself as imprisoned by the “overwhelming force of habit.”³ He found lust to be the demon he had no success in exorcising through willpower.

Is lust just “the sexual impulse dialed up,” as William Gass puts it? Then what’s the harm in it? It merely makes one “alert and on the search, . . . encouragingly alive, paying attention to one’s friends and companions because they may relieve the itch.” As a further point in its favor, “satisfied lust may mean that two people are happy.” The real problem lies with those who would squelch our natural desire for pleasure, argues Gass—the religious prudes, the pleasure haters who taint it with fear and shame and guilty “thou shalt not.”⁴ But when Gass describes lust, does he admit any distinction between lust and sexual desire at all? Is there no other way to pervert sexual desire than to make rules that restrict our unadulterated access to pleasure?

Back to the Beginning

Rather than condemning sex and sexual desires as evil in themselves, or condoning them as a necessary evil, we should start by remembering that God created us as sexual beings. The ability to be sexually aroused and desire sexual pleasure is a natural part of God’s design for human beings. Our sexuality, our bodies, the sexual act, the tactile desires and pleasures that go with it—these are all good gifts from God. Thomas Aquinas thought that sexual intercourse would have been *more* pleasurable in Eden than after the fall into sin. There is a whole book of the Bible (Song of Songs) dedicated to celebrating sexual love between a man and a woman in its various erotic expressions.

Acknowledging the goodness of sex is the first step, because we can’t define lust as damaging or disordered pleasure-seeking unless there is a well-ordered, delightful form to which it fails to measure up. The right view of this great good will avoid two traps. On the one hand, it will avoid degrading sexual pleasure into meaningless triviality or base instinct. On the other hand, it will avoid elevating it into

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Some of my Christian college students are under the impression that well-ordered sex works like this: before marriage, you can't have any, and you have to squash your sexual urges. After marriage, all the rules fall away and it's a big sexual free-for-all (as long as it's with your spouse, of course). You can gratify your sexual desires whenever and however you want. Chastity is a virtue you need only if you are actually abstaining in the premarital state or if you are crazy enough to choose celibacy—although they usually fail to consider this latter option altogether. (It's unclear whether their failure to consider celibacy should be attributed to youthful hormones or because most Protestant churches don't hold this up as a serious option for Christians anymore.)

My students are right that sexual desire should be expressed in the right context—marriage. Marriage vows and the sexual consummation that signifies and seals them join two persons into one. The union should last as long as the people in it do. But our typical view of the virtue of chastity is still woefully narrow. Does chastity have a purpose in marriage other than just limiting our sexual expression to the person who is our spouse? Who needs chastity and when and why? Is there such a thing as lustfulness in married, otherwise licit sexual activity? It's notable that Thomas Aquinas, who overemphasizes the procreative purpose of sex almost to the point of forgetting about its potential for intimacy, explicitly warns husbands not to use their wives indecently for their own sexual pleasure. This is "counter to the good of marriage," he says—even to the point of being a worse offense than adultery—because it "breaks faith" between husband and wife.⁵ How, then, both before and during marriage, does "being chaste" mean more than bodily abstinence from intercourse? How can chastity free us from lust, and how does it protect sexual desire from corruption? If we frame the conversation in terms of the virtues and vices, perhaps we can keep the goodness of sexuality in the forefront of our attention and ask more fruitful questions than, "How far can I go on a date?" or "At what point do I technically lose my virginity?"

"Sex Is like Nitroglycerin"

People both inside and outside the church think Christians make too big a deal of sexual sin. The church is obsessed with sex, they com-

plain, and the word from the pulpit is always a resounding NO. The youth pastor hosts a purity weekend exhorting teens to abstinence, to add their own personal "NO" to the party line. N. T. Wright tells the joke about Moses carrying the commandments down from Mount Sinai. "'Good news and bad news,' he says. 'The good news is—we've got them down from forty to ten. The bad news is—adultery is still in.'"⁶ The sexual deviance of other people and the lustfulness of our culture are constant fodder for Christian condemnation. But what about anger and self-centeredness and racism and materialism, which are also prevalent and very damaging? The Bible itself seems more focused on other sins, like hypocrisy, faithlessness, and greed. Why do Christians focus so much negative attention on sex?

It's true that Christians do seem to treat sex as if it were the culture's main problem, and other sins as if they were less important. And that is worth complaining about. Yet we can also respond to criticism of the church by affirming that there is good reason to get upset about sexual sin. What is sex and what is it for? First, sex is an act designed to bond two people together into a one-flesh union. Second, it's an act designed to create new human beings—babies. What's at stake in sex? Love and life. Human relationships and human existence. It's hard to see how one could overemphasize the importance of something like that. If lust has the power to damage human love-giving and life-giving, then perhaps we cannot make too big a deal of the destructive potential of sexual sin. Buechner notes, "Contrary to Mrs. Grundy, sex is not a sin. Contrary to Hugh Hefner, it's not salvation either. Like nitroglycerin, it can be used either to blow up bridges or heal hearts."⁷

And yet, we should not forget that lust usually begins as a sin of weakness, not a sin of malice, to put it in Aquinas's terms. People get carried away by curiosity or strong desires. They weren't planning to be awful and hurt people and create scars that last a lifetime. They just got caught up in the moment, or got caught in a current of habits that soon swept out of control. Sexual desires are a natural and powerful and beautiful thing, so it's understandable that we underestimate their force and hold on us before we're in the heat of the moment. So while lust is a big deal—something with major potential for damage—people who struggle with it also tend to feel regret and shame, to appreciate offers of help to escape from it, and to respond readily to mercy, rather than condemnation. Of course anyone can get hardened over time—this is why we should guard against making

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lustful desire a *habit*. But for most of us, lust feels like an uninvited demon who has taken over our lives, and once we see if for what it is, we want to escape from it as much as anyone does.

The cultural conversation needs to more honestly acknowledge sex's power. The church's conversation, however, should start with the goodness of sex and virtuous sexual desire—its love- and live-giving power—not just distortions of that power, since vices can only be understood as deviations from the good of virtue. As with all the natural capacities with which God created us, our sexual desires are not meant to be squelched or sublimated, but expressed in a way that respects our full humanness. Proper use and enjoyment of our sexual nature should track the way sexual desire and its fulfillment can enhance our relationships with God and each other. An approach to lust as a *vice* will ask not just what the "thou shalt nots" are, but what having a lustful habit says about who I am as a human being. How do unruly sexual desires deform my character, my perception, my capacity to love? How do my patterns of pleasure-seeking enhance or corrupt my relationship with God? How does thinking about lust as a vice and not just a behavior problem change the way we think about sexual sin? Lust need not be consummated in sex to be lust. Lust is a problem with the heart above your belt before it is a problem with the heat below it.

Defining the Disorder

Sexual desire and pleasure are meant to be a part of good sex. To put it bluntly, sex isn't as good without them. Sexual pleasure is a good designed to accompany sexual activity. The trouble is lust's reductive impulses: to reduce sexual pleasure to one's own individual gratification, apart from a relationship to a person; or to reduce it to the only end we have in view, apart from all its other purposes; or to strip it down to its purely physical dimension, apart from its integration into our full humanity.

Good sex has an interpersonal and social dimension, a dimension that brings us into connection and relationship with others. Lust is deformed sexual desire because it cuts us off from this potential. Sexual desire is meant ultimately to bring us into a union of intimacy with another person. It has the power to bond a man and a woman together in love. The old-fashioned term for sexual intercourse is "the conjugal

act”—an act that conjoins people together into one flesh, creating and strengthening and symbolizing a union of lifelong love. It is a symptom of our lustful culture that we shorten “sexual intercourse” to just plain “sex.” Sex’s natural bonding effect is something we have to actively resist if we want to keep things casual, recreational, no strings attached. Many of us know people who are in unhealthy relationships and stay in them far too long, against their better judgment and others’ clear advice, because of the power of the sexual bond.

Sex is also interpersonal in the sense that it has the power to procreate a new human person. Sex is designed not just for pleasure making and lovemaking, but for bringing new life into the world. It links us not only to our spouse here and now in this moment, but to a child who could be born—and thus to future generations. When our second child was born, our pastor visited me in the hospital. He picked up the baby, looked at me, and said, “He’s forever, Rebecca.” It struck me forcefully there for the first time that the natural result of sex was to bind me inextricably to others beyond myself and the limits of my own lifetime. What sex between husband and wife had joined together, no one could ever separate. Sex’s natural links both to love and to life reflect its deep other-connectedness and its future- and forever-directedness. With enough cleverness and technical assistance, of course, we can procure sexual pleasure without its love-giving and life-giving potential (albeit with no guarantee of success), but again, we must willfully work against our social and bodily nature to keep sex solitary or sterile.

Lust, by contrast, pretends sex and sexual pleasure are a party for one. Lust makes sexual pleasure all about me. It is a self-gratification project. This feature of lust more than any other puts it in opposition to well-ordered sexual enjoyment. In lust, sexual pleasure is divorced from love and mutual self-giving. And when we lust we certainly want nothing to do with giving life and the future commitments that might bring—if we even register the thought that the organs involved are reproductive by design. I want *my* pleasure, says the lustful one, and I want it now.

This is why it is characteristic of lust to degrade the fullness of sex into a merely physical act. Ricoeur says, “Everything that makes the sexual encounter easy simultaneously speeds its collapse into insignificance.”⁸ Perhaps the hardest thing to appreciate about sex until one has experienced it is the way sex is more than a physical act. The emotional bond of intimacy and the union of persons is all

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part of the “one-flesh-ness” of the thing. If we strip off its personal and social meaning, which lust demands that we do, we are left with the version of sex found in *Cosmopolitan* magazine, which offers tips and techniques on how to achieve the greatest orgasm of one’s life and make things “hotter” in bed. *Cosmo*, *Maxim*, and the like have nothing to say about what sexual desire and intercourse look like in the context of love. To anyone who has experienced the beauty and warmth of married intercourse, the *Cosmo* sex experience looks cold, clinical, and downright abhorrent. Lustful sex makes the other person instrumental to getting what I want, or a necessary audience for my successful performance. As Pieper puts it, lust wants “it,” while proper *eros* desires a beloved person.⁹ Lust aims for the antithesis of real intimacy. No wonder it leaves one feeling used and empty.

Lust is a vice, then, because it does not honor the fullness of sex, and it alienates people from each other just when they are supposed to be experiencing intimate union. There’s a betrayal of meaning in lust’s use of sex for nothing but self-gratification, and it is difficult to be lustful without feeling that loss at some level. If one *is* successful in becoming immune to the goods involved in sex, one has also been successful in becoming less fully human.

Filling and Fulfilling Myself

The dynamics of lust’s search for pleasure are like those operating in its close cousin, gluttony. Their excessiveness reduces something designed for more than pleasure to mere pleasure, and reduces even the fullness of that pleasure to mere self-gratification. Buechner also notes the parallel: “At its roots the hunger to know someone sexually is the hunger to know and be known by that person humanly. Food without nourishment doesn’t fill the bill for long, and neither does sex without humanness.”¹⁰ Both real love and the sexual pleasure that complements it involve giving and receiving. Sexual desire is *for* sexual intercourse, and in sexual intercourse there’s meant to be a mutual gift of oneself, more than an exchange of bodily stimulation. It’s a relationship of two whole persons, not a contract in which someone is valued only in terms of their potential to arouse us and is disposable when the pleasure fades. Just as the glutton sees in food only a useful means for filling herself with comfort and pleasure, so

the lustful one sees in sex and sexual objects only their usefulness in giving pleasure to herself.¹¹

That lust imitates gluttony in this respect is not surprising, since they are both vices dealing with physical pleasures. The glutton, as a result of her disordered love for pleasure in eating, becomes unable to appreciate and be satisfied with the pleasure of a simple meal of ordinary quantity and quality. She needs more and better to stimulate and satisfy. And then more and better yet, for habitual indulgence only strengthens the desire and its demands for satisfaction.¹² Her mistake is to try to satisfy an infinite spiritual need by filling her stomach with food; her dissatisfaction is ensured because her desire for eternal and perfect fulfillment cannot be quenched with the temporary pleasure of eating. The Christian view of order and disorder in both of these areas tells us how to celebrate the fullness of the pleasure, rather than dampening it or forbidding it, despite the tradition's reputation to the contrary.¹³ As deceptive as their false reputations are, lust, not chastity's restraint, is the real pleasure-killer. Being able to appreciate physical goods requires that we not try to use them to satiate our spiritual needs.

In a nutshell, lust is the excessive desire for my own sexual pleasure. It's defined in terms of *physical* pleasure stemming from *physical* acts. Sexual intercourse requires a body, and so does sexual desire. The key to understanding lust as a vice, however, is seeing that what we do physically is intimately linked to spiritual effects. As Buechner puts it,

Adultery, promiscuity either heterosexual or homosexual, masturbation—one appealing view is that anything goes as long as no one gets hurt. The trouble is that human beings are so hopelessly psychosomatic in composition that whatever happens to the soma [body] happens also to the psyche [soul] and vice versa.¹⁴

The ancient Greek philosophers taught that if human beings were merely animals, bodily pleasure would be enough to fulfill us. But even they knew that there is more to being human than having a body. Why does lust leave us empty? Because it tries to substitute sensual and selfish pleasure-seeking for fully human love-giving.

That lust—the habitual vice—has an insatiable quality to it is a testimony to this fact about us. As beings with a spiritual as well as a physical dimension, we need something more than bodily satisfac-

tion to fulfill us. We need a physical fix, a fleet

The Greek philosopher Plato, in a comic physical story he spins with four arms and to usurp the gods' joy. In our current conception of the original whole, we are reunited with ourselves, even if sexual union is not a wholeness for now.

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It is true "wholeness" he argues, and no. Trying to make that fulfilling us is a struggle to fill our fundamental disappointment.¹⁷ that it will be enough to us?

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The Greek philosopher Plato once told a myth about *eros* in the voice of a comic poet named Aristophanes.¹⁵ According to the whimsical story he spins, human beings were originally spherical creatures with four arms and four legs and two heads. As punishment for trying to usurp the gods' power, the gods sliced them in half "like a flatfish." In our current condition, then, each human being is really only half of the original whole. *Eros*, so says Aristophanes, is our yearning to be reunited with our other half; it is our desire for completeness. But even if sexual union is the best way to achieve this reunion or lost wholeness for now, it is imperfect and temporary.

No one would think that [what lovers want from each other] is the intimacy of sex—that mere sex is the reason each lover takes so great and deep a joy in being with the other. It's obvious that the soul of every lover longs for something else; his soul cannot say what it is, but like an oracle it has a sense of what it wants, and like an oracle it lies hidden behind a riddle.¹⁶

It is true "wholeness" and re-union into oneness that they yearn for, he argues, and no amount of physical intercourse will fill that need. Trying to make the physical union of sex alone do all the work of fulfilling us is a strategy doomed to fail. Trying to get sexual pleasure to fill our fundamental yearning for human happiness is a recipe for disappointment.¹⁷ Then why do we keep trying it, deluding ourselves that it will be enough? Why is the lustful person's strategy so tempting to us?

All the vices are distorted or excessive attachments to good things. Wrath is ostensibly born of concern for justice and honor, greed regards sufficient possessions, gluttony is about food, vainglory seeks the approval of others. Vice happens when our pursuit of these good things gets twisted, that is, when we try to make them fill gaps and needs in our hearts that only God can fill, and when we define happiness in terms of them, rather than appreciating them as (finite) blessings from God.

Here lust's connection with pride reveals itself. Lust is the habit of trying to engineer my own happiness for myself, on my own terms. In lust, my own pleasure is the goal, and I decide where to get it, and when, and with whom. My life revolves around my desires, wants, and

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Pleasure, as the ancient Greeks noted, is easy to confuse with human fulfillment, because it is something sought for its own sake. The paradox of pleasure, however, as they also noted, is that you can't get it by seeking it directly. Aristotle said that pleasure is an effect of certain activities done in a certain way; it is the fruit of activity, but not something that can be produced or achieved without the activity itself. Pleasure is also relative to the activity it accompanies. The pleasure of sitting in the sunshine is not the same thing as the pleasure of reading a good book. The pleasure of reading a gripping drama is not the same as the pleasure of reading an action adventure novel. The pleasure of reading to myself is not the same as the pleasure of reading to my children.

Sexual pleasure is like this too. It explains why the pleasure of the porn user requires rapid escalation of sexual stimulation, while a happily married person can still thoroughly enjoy conventional sex decades into a marriage to the same spouse. Sexual pleasure—both its quality and its ability to satisfy—depends on the activity from which you get it. The lustful one gets the sham, shallow version of sexual pleasure, the physical rush that feels great for a moment but cannot satisfy for more than a moment either. It's not news to anyone that studies consistently show the highest sexual satisfaction among those in faithful, monogamous marriages, not those whose sex lives are promiscuous.¹⁹ Why? Because in these marriages the sexual pleasure is the fruit of love. That sort of pleasure is unavailable to those who are in it only for the pleasure, and only for their own pleasure. In her poem, "To a Long Loved Love," Madeleine L'Engle writes,

We who have seen the new moon grow old together
Who have seen winter rime the fields and stones
As though it would claim earth and water forever
We who have known the touch of flesh and the shape of bones
Know the old moon stretching its shadows across a whitened
field
More beautiful than spring with all its spate of blooms
What passions knowledge of tried flesh still yields,
What joy and comfort these familiar rooms.

In the moonless, lampless dark now of this bed
My body knows each line and curve of yours;
My fingers know the shape of limb and head:
As pure as mathematics ecstasy endures . . .²⁰

In this case, with familiarity comes not contempt and boredom but trust and intimacy and more selfless love—the very context in which sexual pleasure comes into full bloom. “Do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready,” counsels the author of Song of Songs (8:4). This is advice from those who want the heights of sexual pleasure to be possible for us—as the rest of this biblical book makes clear—not from those who seek to repress it. The simple truth in these examples is this: fulfilling pleasure without commitment and full human intimacy is lust’s perennially empty promise. As with the other vices, lust gives you an imitation of happiness, a substitute for the real thing. True playfulness and lasting pleasure find their home in trustful, intimate intercourse with one who takes delight in us for who we really are.

The positive point here is that our sexual desires and pleasures should be integrated into our personal and social and spiritual lives such that they serve to enhance our full humanness and the possibility of loving each other. Our control over them helps them serve us; our indulgence of them makes them our masters, even as they leave us empty.

Lust’s Body Count

One of the most problematic assumptions about lust is that it doesn’t hurt anyone. Even Aquinas, in the thirteenth century, considers this “no-injury” objection. Fornication involves two consenting adults. No one is injured; therefore, fornication is not a sin.²¹ It’s lustful activity that is pleasurable and fun, and what’s the harm in that?

In some cases the injuries are obvious. Lust’s cost to love and life are painfully evident in the story of David and Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11–12). David’s selfishness cost Uriah his life, it cost Bathsheba the death of her husband and child, and it cost David a painful rupture in his relationship with God (Ps. 51) and the loss of a son. But the damage did not just stop with those directly involved. Uriah was betrayed by the king he served faithfully, and David’s general Joab became complicit in that betrayal. First David’s army and then (after a visit from Nathan the prophet) his palace servants and his people saw their king willing to sacrifice his obedient subjects to his own selfish desires. Trust was broken, loyalties undercut, and relationships at all levels damaged.

Even if we are not directly burned by its fire, however, lust’s smoke can cause damage far and wide. A neighborhood feels threatened when

a sex offender moves in, explicit sexual content on their peers and starts to impair their chances of difficulties broken marriages, ripped families, churches, and lust’s collateral damage.

The damage may be more subtle. Statistics show that a significant number of people who have had multiple extramarital affairs are still in a net. Even if they stop, the images to remain in their minds and our knowledge of them on a date, or later in life, describes the way college women are just bad at speaking about the opposite sex from other men and that we find entertainment.

When national demographics show that one in six to six-year-old girls are being ramping up our sex education normalized as its target sexual desire are in a problem.

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a sex offender moves in, billboards and magazines expose children to explicit sexual content, teens having premarital sex early put pressure on their peers and struggle with depression, cohabiting young adults impair their chances of stable marriages later (with all the social difficulties broken marriages often bring), sexual abuse and affairs can rip families, churches, and communities apart. We often live with lust's collateral damage for the long term.

The damage may also be less sensational, and more subtle. Recent statistics show that at least 80 percent of teens age fifteen to seventeen have had multiple exposures to hard-core pornography on the Internet. Even if they stop looking, everyone knows the power of these images to remain imprinted on the mind. What does this experience, and our knowledge of it, do to the atmosphere in a co-ed classroom, on a date, or later in a marriage or a life of singleness? Naomi Wolf describes the way college women think men see them now: "real naked women are just bad porn."²² Lustful attitudes permeate the way we speak about the opposite sex, what we assume we can expect sexually from other men and women, and the misogyny and sexual violence that we find entertaining.

When national department store chains market "sexy" underwear to six-year-old girls, we should see the handiwork of lust, continually ramping up our sexual demands to the extent that even children are normalized as its targets. The demands of excessive and misdirected sexual desire are in the air we breathe. Lust is not a private, personal problem.

Robert Solomon and William Gass poke fun at the religious prudes who condemn the harmless fun of a "few too many peeks at a naughty *Playboy* pictorial,"²³ but their comments betray an embarrassing (or perhaps willful) ignorance. It's almost impossible not to have read the statistics on pornography use and its addictive power, not to have read a testimony by addicts of their self-loathing and the brokenness they caused in their families,²⁴ not to mention the gender dynamics of the billion-dollar sex industry.

Alan Paton tells a story about the power of lust in his book, *Too Late the Phalarope*. Pieter van Vlaanderen, a police officer in South Africa, commits adultery with a young woman late at night in a vacant lot outside of town.

And how long he stayed there he could not remember, but at least he rose and came out of the vacant ground. And his body and clothes

stank with the smell of the weeds, and the stinking was a symbol of his corruption. . . . And he thought again of his children with special agony, for what kind of man would destroy what he had created, and hurt what he had loved? . . . In those last twelve hours the whole world had changed, because of one insensate act. And what madness makes a man pursue something so unspeakable, deaf to the cries of wife and children and mother and friends and blind to their danger, to grasp one unspeakable pleasure that brought no joy, ten thousand of which pleasures were not worth one of the hairs on his children's heads? Such desire could not surely be a desire of the flesh, but some mad desire of a sick and twisted soul. And why should I have this desire? he asked himself. Where did it come from? And how did one cure it? But he had no answers to these questions. . . .

And his terrible knowledge of himself lay in him darkly and heavily, and took away his laughter, and the laughter of his wife, so that the children were the only creatures that laughed in that house. He went to work darkly and heavily, and came back darkly and heavily, and played with the children because that was his habit, but his wife could hear and see that it was not the same.²⁵

As both porn and Paton's story show, lust damages the one who lusts too. One author of a book on teen sex describes this damage as "emotional STD's."²⁶ Even if you don't get gonorrhea or genital warts, you are likely to come home with depression, loneliness, and self-hatred.

Buechner comments: "Who is to say who gets hurt and who doesn't get hurt, and how? Maybe the injuries are all internal. Maybe it will be years before the X-rays show up anything. Maybe the only person who gets hurt is you."²⁷

Lust: Body and Soul

On a first glance, the fathers of the church often seem to write as if the body is a kind of enemy of the spiritual life. It is easy to read their asceticism and celibacy as a rejection of the body: witness their references to "filth" and "shame" in the context of sexual desires.²⁸ Are sexual desires intrinsically evil and to be shunned? John Cassian recommends that monks trying to avoid lust "flee from women."²⁹ Evagrius likewise says that "the sight of a woman is a poisoned arrow; it wounds the soul and injects the poison, and for as long a time as it

stays there it causes an e to think that they believ But this reading of the gerated. For one thing, those who have vowed p from worldly affairs into devotion to God. Despi and our own, however, took the unity of body : preciated that what we as the apostle Paul affi philosopher Descartes without it."³¹ By contra means treating the bod pleasure accidentally c

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stays there it causes an ever greater festering."³⁰ It might be tempting to think that they believe women, not men, are the real cause of lust! But this reading of the tradition is often oversimplified and exaggerated. For one thing, these radical directives are intended only for those who have vowed perpetual abstinence and who have withdrawn from worldly affairs into the desert in order to pursue a single-minded devotion to God. Despite the deep differences between their context and our own, however, in many ways these early Christian ascetics took the unity of body and soul more seriously than we do. They appreciated that what we do with our bodies affects our spiritual lives, as the apostle Paul affirms (1 Cor. 6:13b–20). The famous modern philosopher Descartes once said, "I am not my body and I can live without it."³¹ By contrast, taking the disordered habit of lust seriously means treating the body as part of ourselves, not as an instrument of pleasure accidentally conjoined to us that doesn't affect our souls.

Cassian describes the virtue of chastity as something to be cultivated on the inside as well as the outside; it is a "chastity of body and soul": "And so, first of all, the hidden places of our heart must be very carefully purified. For what those others wish to acquire in terms of purity of body, we must ourselves possess in the depths of our conscience." In discussing celibacy among the monks, he remarks, "the incorruption of the flesh consists not so much in abstaining from woman as it does in integrity of heart."³²

Paul makes the same point about the unity of the human person: "Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, 'The two shall be one flesh,'" (1 Cor. 6:16). He argues that we cannot divorce sex from its marital "one flesh" meaning any more than we could dissociate a person's body and what it does from the person herself. Our minds and hearts affect us physically: for example, when we are anxious or grieving, we lose our appetites and we can't sleep. And our bodies affect our hearts and minds: when we don't get enough sleep, we become irritable and easily distracted; after exercise, we feel better about ourselves and have a brighter outlook. Why should it be any different with sex and sexual desire? The tradition's claim is that this body-soul link is a feature present in every human sexual act. That means that respecting yourself requires respecting your body too. And if you are to love your neighbor *as yourself*, that extends to your respect for their body—their person—as well.

John Mayer had a hit song a few years ago called "Your Body Is a Wonderland." The lustful view of the body expressed in the title

and lyrics does not convey wonder in the sense of awe. Its view of the other's body is that it is one's own personal amusement park. It's a place to have fun and explore and get excitement, and then at the end of the day, we are free to leave it behind, along with our trash and our sweat on the vinyl seats. How do we think of our bodies and the bodies of others? Paul writes that they are "a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God" (1 Cor. 6: 19). Are they sacred spaces or a place for cheap thrills? The lustful person's distorted desire for pleasure leads her to treat both herself and others with less value and respect than she ought. Lust is as irreverent about bodies and sex as it is obsessed with them. The body is a pleasure-delivery device, to be used at will. But the Christian view of the body is that it is a place where God dwells, an image of the living God. To degrade each other sexually is to participate in the "degradation of a king [or queen]."³³

Mind Games

Because it lives in denial of reality—the reality of what human beings are made for, the depth and value of personhood, and our need for love—lust characteristically trades in fantasy. A poem by Steve Turner vividly makes this point:

She no longer brought him pleasure
Like girls in magazines
Who throbbed with lust and fantasy
And stayed sweet seventeen.

He never heard those beauties moan
(Except when in the sack!)
They knew a woman's place to be
Undressed and on her back . . .

She no longer brought him pleasure
Like girls in magazines,
So they slept in separate beds
And snuggled up with dreams.

He no longer brought her pleasure
Like men in Mills and Boon

Who were pe
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In grey Merc
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He no longer
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So they slept
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of what human beings ood, and our need for A poem by Steve Turner

Who were powerful yet gentle
And impeccably groomed . . .

In grey Mercedes cars they drove.
Their teeth and eyes were bright,
They promised their undying love
In pools of candlelight.

He no longer brought her pleasure
Like men in Mills and Boon
So they slept in separate beds,
Then moved to single rooms.

They no longer found their pleasure
In lives where flesh was real,
So muddled on or called it quits
Or chased a better deal.³⁴

Trading lustful fantasies for reality makes this couple unable to love and appreciate each other anymore. Even real love struggles against the power of fantasy, as L'Engle describes:

Because you're not what I would have you be
I blind myself to who, in truth, you are
Seeking mirage where desert blooms, I mar
Your *you*. Aaah, I would like to see
Past all delusion to reality:
Then would I see God's image in your face,
His hand in yours, and in your eyes his grace.
Because I'm not what I would have me be,
I idolize Two who are not any place,
Not you, not me, and so we never touch.
Reality would burn. I do not like it much.
And yet in you, in me, I find a trace
Of love which struggles to break through
The hidden lovely truth of me, of you.³⁵

Lust is in the eye—and mind—of the beholder. When the entire advertising industry is built upon the power of images, we ought not to underestimate their effect on our desires and minds.³⁶ What sorts of images, desires, and expectations fill our minds and feed our hearts every day? Do we get them from soap operas, romance novels, Inter-

net porn, magazine ads and catalogs, shop windows, R-rated films, late-night cable shows, or the music we download? Do these sources speak truth about human sexuality and its goodness, or do they feed our lustful fantasies?

The tradition describes the long-term effects of lust by linking the desires of our hearts to the contents of our mind in a vicious cycle. Aquinas and Gregory call lust's most grave offspring vice "blindness of mind"—the inability to recognize and appreciate goods higher than the pleasure of the flesh or beyond the moment of gratification.³⁷ Lust's effect is to shrink our world and then to make all our powers of deliberation and imagination serve that narrowly self-serving, flesh-aimed vision of the good. Pieper notes the distorting power of what he calls lust's "self-centered will-to-pleasure" by contrast with love's clear vision: "Only those who look at the world with pure eyes can experience its beauty."³⁸

Chastity and Other Impossible Virtues

If what to do about lust is the question, sex education is not the answer. We all know that we can be utterly convinced in principle that lust can ruin love between human beings and still in practice find ourselves struggling mightily to resist it. Similarly, in matters of nutrition, knowledge of how many calories are needful and healthy does not equal the will to resist a second helping of dessert or to forgo the French fries. On a beach full of tanned, glowing skin, the demon of lust is still there with us. When we need a remedy for lust, more preaching and more book chapters do not necessarily make temptation fade.

As a first suggestion, we should broaden the parameters of what counts as lustful, so that we can see better the territory that chastity too will need to cover. Often we think of lust only in terms of engaging in sexual intercourse when we ought not—for example, premarital sex for the unmarried, and adultery for the married. Lust is actually expressed in a much wider range of behaviors, as well as the internal thoughts and desires that give rise to them. Scripture reflects this twofold view of lust's disorder. The scriptures prohibit not just extramarital intercourse, but "sexual immorality" in general, including illicit sexual thoughts, desires, and fantasies and all that we do to indulge them in ourselves and others. Abstinence from intercourse, the protection of one's virginity,

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may be a convenient litmus test, but Christians are also called to have chaste hearts and minds. How can we cultivate our character, inwardly and outwardly, so that our own sexual desires are not the lens through which we see the world and grasp at it?

Lust thrives in privacy and isolation, and lustful people often feel shame, which also motivates them to keep their struggles hidden from others. But when we hide our sin and deny it, we cannot confess it or deal with it. This means lust’s remedy requires community, openness, and accountability. Sheer individual willpower doesn’t work. It’s a cycle a lot like yo-yo dieting. About 90 percent of all diets fail, with failure defined as having gained back the same pounds lost (and usually more) within a year of starting the diet. Lust’s cycle is similar: we keep it private, trying to tackle it alone, making fervent new resolutions, failing to live up to them, despising ourselves afterward, and then falling into despair and letting ourselves get in again, this time even deeper. To get out of the cycle, we would have to open ourselves up to someone else who can keep us honest and accountable. Countering lust’s alienating tendencies, chastity requires intentionally being part of a community.

There are a host of small, practical things to do, of course. We can keep computers in public areas, get an Internet filter and accountability software. We can know better what makes us vulnerable and schedule alternate activities or call for help during those times. We can keep our language respectful and our jokes clean. We can much more carefully regulate which movies and television shows we watch and which magazines we read. We can dress modestly. One group of teenage boys started a “first row club” at church. So that they wouldn’t be distracted by the revealing way girls at their church were dressed, a group of them agreed to sit together in the front pew each week. They physically situated themselves out of the view of temptation and in view of God’s Word. That strategy is worth trying outside of church too. Reading the Bible and reminding ourselves of his love also helps; he wants the most beautiful and best for us, nothing less. Our minds *will* be full of images and ideas—but which ones? We can follow Paul’s advice to seek out what is true, honorable, just, pure, excellent, and praiseworthy (Phil. 4:8), rather than letting just anything that comes our way drift in.

The bottom line, however, is that *not* doing things is not the only or the best answer. Chastity is not mere abstinence, just saying no. Let’s face it, by the time we’re tempted—even if we do say no—it can already be too late to avoid lust. So often we try to have it both ways—filling our

senses with lustful stimuli and courting sin without actually consenting to it, and then despairing of our ability to keep our hearts and hands pure in the moment of decision. We tend to try to walk as close to the edge of the cliff as we can, hoping that we can keep our balance and not fall off. Chastity commits us to staying away from the edge altogether. "Flee from sexual immorality!" counsels Paul (1 Cor. 6:18 NIV). Don't court it, flirt with it, consider it, bring it tantalizingly close, and then try to stay strong enough to resist it. Flee early and flee often.

If chastity is not a rulebook of "don'ts," then what is it? It is a "pro-love" lifestyle, and therefore a virtue one needs whether single, married, old or young. Chastity is not something you need only when dating or surfing the Internet; it is a quality of one's character, evident in all areas of life. Chastity is a positive project, a project of becoming a person with an outlook that allows one to selflessly appreciate good and attractive things—most especially bodies and the pleasures they afford—by keeping those goods ordered to the good of the whole person and his or her vocation to love.³⁹ Chastity's fundamental question is not, "How far should I go on a date without crossing some invisible line of 'sin'?" but rather, "How can my life—my thoughts, my choices, my emotional responses, my conversation, and my behavior—make me a person who is best prepared to give and receive love in relationship with others?" Chastity preserves and protects and paves the way for wholeness in all our relationships, all of the time. To channel and control our sexual desires is to empower ourselves to love.

The best advice, then, for resisting lust is not to get an Internet filter (although you should do that too!), but to have good friends. If we have genuine friendships in which we learn to give and receive love in a healthy and satisfying way, we will be less inclined to wander off looking for sham substitutes and quick fixes. Good friendships teach us how to respect one another, to offer appropriate physical affection, to appreciate and care for others without looking for something in return, to trust one another. Someone who knows what real love looks like, whether in a sexual relationship or not, is a person who is less tempted to find lustful pleasures a tempting option. If your relationships with others and with God adequately feed your need to love and be loved, you will both see through and despise what lust has to offer.

Aquinas describes our relationship to God as "the love of friendship."⁴⁰ To overcome lust, we need to be anchored in this love. C. S. Lewis said, "What we call 'being in love' is a glorious state, and, in several ways, good for us. It helps to make us generous and courageous,

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it opens our eyes not only to the beauty of the beloved but to all beauty, and it subordinates . . . our merely animal sexuality; in that sense, love is the great conqueror of lust.”⁴¹ The challenge to live out this kind of love is Jesus's new commandment (John 15:12), a command he gives all who are members of his body. Thus, chastity keeps our identity as members of Christ at the fore of our self-understanding and the way we view others.

Sexual vice illustrates that the greater the power and beauty of the good at stake, the greater the destruction and the potential for ugliness and evil. A short film called *Flame* compares sex to fire. When we respect the power of fire and keep it in its proper place, we can appreciate its beauty and bask in its warmth.⁴² At the end of the film, a man douses a pile of timber as tall as a house with gasoline. Then he takes the tiny flame of his lighter and sets it ablaze. The whole night sky is illuminated by the conflagration, flames leaping up to the heavens in the middle of a snowy, barren landscape. Don't settle for less than God's good gift of true sexual pleasure, he says. Instead, by respecting and protecting the real power of love, “discover the *big* flame.” Sexual desire that is rightly directed and ruled gives us eyes to see the beauty and goodness of our sexuality, and to experience the full pleasure of its virtuous expression.

L'Engle writes, to her “long-loved love”:

Unclench your fists
 Hold out your hands
 Take mine.
 Let us hold each other.
 Thus is his Glory
 Manifest.