Love and Lust

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Sermon Series: Live Faithfully

Matthew 5:27-30

Lust is all about me; love is all about the other.

Some things promise to satisfy but do not deliver. If you are stranded in a lifeboat dying of thirst in the South Pacific, you wouldn’t want to drink the water. Ocean salt water is seven times saltier than our bodies can possibly digest. When we drink ocean water, rather than quenching our thirst, we dehydrate, because our kidneys demand extra water to flush out the overload of salt. The more salt water we consume, the thirstier we become.

Lust is like that. It promises to quench our sexual appetites. But it doesn’t deliver. The more we drink, the thirstier we become.

If I wanted to change the color of the Mississippi River, I wouldn’t dump red dye into the river at Memphis. I would go further upstream to empty the dye in the source of the Mississippi River at Lake Itasca in northern Minnesota.

If we were able, beforehand, to exact the toll promiscuous sex inflicts on human relationships, I suspect we would take all the necessary precautions. So the devil goes farther upstream to do his dirty work. He releases lust into the human heart as a precursor to the deed.

Adultery begins in the heart. Jesus so much as says so in the Sermon on the Mount. Just as anger is the root cause of murder (Matthew 5:21-26), so lust is the root cause of adultery (Matthew 5:27-30).

Lust incubates in the human heart as desire. James says it well: “After desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin” (James 1:15).

Every extramarital relationship begins as a fantasy. Adultery begins in the head before it ever reaches the bed.

Frederick Buechner writes, “Lust is the ape that gibbers in our loins. Tame him as we will by day, he rages all the wilder in our dreams at night. Just when we think we’re safe from him, he raises his ugly head and smirks, and there’s no river in the world that flows cold and strong enough to strike him down.”

I am drawn to something the 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant observed about the difference between love and lust: “Love is that which wishes well, is amicably disposed, promotes the happiness of others and rejoices in it.” Lust, on the other hand, objectifies other people. In Kant’s words, “Lust makes another person the object of appetite.” As soon as the appetite is sated, the other person is discarded. Lust is all about me; love is all about the other.

Lust is peddled to sell everything today, from power boats to designer eyewear.
We live today in a sex-saturated culture. My heart goes out to teenagers who must navigate these perilous waters as they must also contend with raging hormones.

Adolescent girls in western society have a particularly rough go of it. Our culture encourages them to dress provocatively. Stores are all-too-eager to pander to such trends.

Adolescent girls look positively uncomfortable in their tight-fitting, skimpy outfits. It must be a huge annoyance to be constantly tugging on their short skirts and spaghetti strap tops. Wearing body-hugging clothing constitutes a form of cruel and unusual punishment.

I commend to you the book A Return to Modesty, authored by a 20-something woman named Wendy Shalit. She first gained notoriety for protesting coed bathrooms in her school newspaper at Williams College in Massachusetts.

Wendy makes a compelling case in her book for bringing back modesty. To her way of thinking, modesty isn’t prudery. Quite the opposite, modesty is liberating. She claims, “Modesty in dress gives me freedom to think about things other than ‘how do I look?’”

“The real reason I hate Playboy,” she writes, “is that the models establish a standard I cannot possibly attain without the help of implants, a personal trainer, soft lighting, air brushing and a squad of makeup artists and hairdressers.”

Why do so many women’s magazines such as Cosmos and Glamour feature attractive young women dressed in provocative, seductive apparel? Why do women subject themselves to such unattainable, unrealistic images?

Our culture is obsessed with thinness among the young. Fashion models bear a striking resemblance to Nazi Holocaust victims. Fifty-two percent of adolescents begin dieting before age 14. One out of every five college students suffers from some form of eating disorder. Extreme dieting was readily apparent at the eastern college my daughter attended. Anorexia and bulimia have reached epidemic proportions, as young coeds vainly aspire to attain this impossible ideal.

I have concern for adolescent boys as well, but for a different reason. Studies consistently show that boys ages 12-17 are primary consumers of pornography. The ridiculously skewed depiction of sexuality in pornography will invariably distort a young man’s development toward a healthy sexual identity.

A few years ago, a young woman who works with a campus ministry spoke to a group in our church about the challenges associated with campus ministry. I was struck by what she mentioned first about the obstacles related to working with college students. She said one of the biggest problems in working with collegians is the damaging effects of pornography.
Pornography represents a spiritual assault on God’s gift of sexuality.

The stigma of pornography as dirty old men in raincoats is a thing of the past. Pornography has now gone mainstream. It’s a 12 billion dollar industry today. The revenue generated by porn is now larger than the NFL, the NBA and Major League baseball combined. In a world where there are so many things to think about and learn, there are more internet sites devoted to sexual stimulation than any other subject. Sixty percent of all websites are sexual in nature.

Pornography is becoming normalized. Today, our society no longer sees pornography as deviant or even undesirable.

We don’t hear much about porn these days, since it is largely a covert activity. By its very nature, this quiet epidemic is hidden from view. Porn is now accessible by a single click of a keyboard. Incidentally, the number of Christians plagued by this epidemic is equally alarming. It is estimated that 50 percent of Christian men have viewed pornography in the past three months.

Pornography is profoundly anti-social. It fosters a demeaning attitude toward women, who are depicted as objects and insatiable playthings. Porn is also quietly addictive. Pornography keeps bringing people back for more. But most damaging of all, pornography represents a spiritual assault on God’s gift of sexuality and the purpose for which it was created.

Pornography perpetuates the lie that it can satisfy people’s longings for sexual fulfillment. Pornography entices us with feelings of lasting pleasure. But in reality, it leaves people feeling empty and lonely. Pornography doesn’t liberate; pornography enslaves!

Pornography takes people farther than they want to go. It costs people more than they want to spend. It addicts people more than they will ever know.

What has this sexually liberated age brought us? It has brought sexual addiction, sexual harassment, child abuse, date rape, eating disorders and an endless parade of dreary hook-ups.

Jesus liberates people. “He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives” (Luke 4:18-19).

For those caught in the clutches of porn, my purpose is not to shame or belittle you. The God we worship offers complete forgiveness and full release.

We can’t always prevent temptation from invading our lives, but we can minimize its damaging effects. Martin Luther said, “Temptations cannot always be avoided, but because we cannot prevent the birds from flying over our heads, there is no need that we should let them nest in our hair.”

In the words of a Danish proverb, “No one can be caught in a place he does not visit.” Francois Fenelon wrote in the 1600s, “We are not masters of our feelings, but we are, by God’s grace, master of our consent.” A thought cannot dwell in our minds except by our consent. When impure thoughts invade our minds, we can make every attempt to block it. Job made a covenant with himself never to
Whenever you encounter temptation, run! Run as fast as you can. Undress a young woman with his eyes (Job 31:1).

For any who struggle with internet porn, there is internet accountability software available (Covenant Eyes). I also commend to you Every Man’s Battle Workshops. Don’t let temptation gain mastery in your life. Stop the temptation before it takes hold of your life.

Let me bring you back to something I said last year about temptation. Joseph was sold by his jealous brothers into slavery. Through a remarkable series of events, he resurfaces later as a household servant in the house of Potiphar, who is a high-ranking officer in Pharaoh’s army. As a household servant, Joseph comes into regular contact with Potiphar’s wife. She tries repeatedly to seduce Joseph, who spurns her advances. One day, she grabs hold of Joseph’s tunic and won’t let go. Joseph’s only recourse is to run for it.

I commend Joseph’s approach to temptation. Call it, “the Joseph Principle.” Whenever you encounter temptation, run! Run as fast as you can. Don’t hang around to see what happens. Run, baby, run! Run as fast as your little legs can carry you.

Where do you need to run from temptation? I urge you to run away from temptation and straight into God’s open arms.

You will not defeat sexual temptation by subtraction alone. The Apostle Paul urges us to fill our minds with positive, life-embracing thoughts. “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Philippians 4:7-8).