



# The Seven Deadly Sins (and Their Corresponding Virtues)

## SESSION 1—LUST AND CHASTITY

*Are “lust” and “chastity” helpful concepts to use in discussions about sexuality? What can we learn from the ways lust and chastity were viewed in Christian history and in the Bible?*

### Introduction

A relative of mine, in his fifties, told me that he likes one aspect of getting older: no longer does he think about sex all the time. As a younger man, the constant thoughts of sex were distracting when he was trying to work or talk with a woman.

He noted with an amused smile that sex still comes to mind often enough to enjoy thinking about it, but not so often that it gets in the way of the rest of his life.

Should we consider all those thoughts about sex as lust? Are sexual thoughts healthy and good when directed toward a spouse but lustful and bad when directed toward someone else? Or is the essence of lust thoughts about sex that are somehow disordered or out of proportion?

In our time, when lust is celebrated in popular culture, when a 2007 album by a Danish alternative rock duo called The Raveonettes was titled “Lust, Lust, Lust,” how should Christians think and talk about lust? And is chastity—the virtue associated with lust in the seven deadly sins—a relevant concept in our time?

Lust has often been defined as excessive thoughts or desires of a sexual nature. As we explore the concept of lust in history and in the Bible, we will see that finding a precise definition of this concept is challenging.



The Greek word *epithymia*, translated “lust,” appears several dozen times in the New Testament. The word means desire, longing, passion, craving, or to set one’s heart upon something. It can also mean inordinate desire or lust.

### A Brief History

It was common in the ancient world to assemble lists of sins and vices. An early list of “things that the LORD hates” can be found in Proverbs 6:16–19. As early as the first century, Christians began to compile lists of sins viewed as most significant, and Evagrius of Pontus’s list of eight sins from the fourth century resembles the list of seven deadly sins used today. John Cassian in the fifth century and Gregory the Great in the sixth century refined the list, stressing that these particular sins have significance because of their gravity and because they have the power to generate other sins. (The list commonly used today, based on Gregory the Great’s list, includes pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth.)

The presence of lust in many of the lists of sins is not surprising. Beginning in the early years after Jesus’ resurrection, Christians were distinguished by their sexual ethics. They stayed away from temple prostitution and viewed themselves as freed in Christ from the kinds of

## LOVE AND LUST

We smile at lovers holding hands in the park. But we wrinkle our noses if we find them acting out their lust under the bushes. Love receives the world's applause. Lust is furtive, ashamed, and embarrassed. Love pursues the good of the other, with self-control, concern, reason, and patience. Lust pursues its own gratification, headlong, impatient of any control, immune to reason. Love thrives on candlelight and conversation. Lust is equally happy in a doorway or a taxi, and its conversation is made of animal grunts and cries. Love is individual: there is only the unique Other, the one doted upon, the single star around whom the lover revolves. Lust takes what comes. Lovers gaze into each others' eyes. Lust looks sideways, inventing deceits and stratagems and seductions, sizing up opportunities. Love grows with knowledge and time, courtship, truth, and trust.

*Simon Blackburn<sup>1</sup>*

impure, "unnatural" sexual behaviors they saw in the Greeks and Romans. The wider culture in the Roman Empire gave ample evidence that desire and pleasure could lead to sin, so from the earliest years, Christians emphasized that freedom in Christ enabled them to avoid lustful passions. The many metaphorical speeches in the Old Testament prophets comparing idolatry to adultery (for example, see Jer. 2-3, Hos. 4-5) led early Christians to equate idolatry with sexual depravity.

In the ancient world, this concern about sexual ethics was not unique to Christianity. Aristotle discussed the vice of licentiousness with respect to pleasures arising from the sense of touch, particularly sexual pleasure, and advocated the virtue of temperance. Cicero was concerned about excessive love and its connection to lust. For the philosophers, the excessive desire associated with lust obstructed right reason.

Given the cultural and philosophical forces at work in the early centuries of the Christian church, a deep concern about sexual ethics and a fear of the power of sexual passion is perhaps not surprising. Jerome in the fourth century and Augustine in the fifth century permitted sex within marriage but advocated that it not be

passionate or enjoyable. Celibacy in church leaders was admired as early as the second century, and while it was not enforced for all clergy in the Western church until many centuries later, it was an ideal that was upheld by many throughout the medieval period. In fact, for more than a thousand years, the single, celibate life was usually viewed as the Christian ideal.

Many Christians today will find some or all of these views of sex odd and even harmful. The idea that married people should have no pleasure in their sexual relationship or that celibacy is the mark of true spirituality makes most of us shake our heads in bafflement at the kinds of things Christians in earlier centuries believed. Indeed, some have argued that the requirement of celibacy for Roman Catholic priests has been a primary cause of the clergy pedophilia nightmare. Some also argue that the repression of sexuality in the Victorian period led to excesses.

Christian teachings about sexuality throughout the ages have many weaknesses, but the secular world has not formulated an alternative sexual ethic that results in spiritual, psychological, and emotional health. We live in a time when the pain caused by disordered sexuality is visible in almost every newspaper and news broadcast.

On any given day, we might read about a twelve-year-old with multiple sex partners, someone who is HIV positive and has infected others by refusing to use condoms, a group of athletes who gang rape a disabled woman, a man who fathered multiple children with his own daughter, or a jealous lover who has committed murder. Books, movies, and popular music frequently depict the sexual humiliation of women, and experts believe that somewhere between 25 and 40 percent of women experience sexual assault at some time in their lives, often at the hands of a family member.<sup>2</sup>

## Sexuality in the Old Testament

In the Hebrew Bible, heterosexual sexual intercourse was celebrated within marriage. It was not viewed as inherently sinful in any way, and sexual intercourse between a husband and wife was seen as obligatory and to be enjoyed. The Song of Solomon celebrated romantic and sexual love. Most of the sexual prohibitions in the Old Testament were designed to preserve property rights and ritual purity and to prevent the kinds of sexual practices associated with Canaanite worship.



We urgently need more discussion in Christian settings about the good gift of sexuality, rejecting the emphasis, so common in Christian history, of human sexuality as inherently dirty or sinful.

In the Old Testament, candor about sexuality was coupled with modesty, reserve, and a commitment to ethical behavior. When Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden, God gave them garments and they covered themselves (Gen. 3:21). The story of Bathsheba and David is often cited as an example of the way the sin of lust leads to other sins. After David's adultery with Bathsheba and his subsequent arrangements to have Bathsheba's husband killed, the prophet Nathan confronted David with his sin, speaking in God's name (2 Sam. 11–12). The rape of David's daughter, Tamar, by her half brother, Amnon, is portrayed as shameful (2 Sam. 13). Proverbs 7:10–27 vividly describes the seductive power of illicit sexual attraction and warns against becoming a victim, allowing one's heart to turn aside and stray, thus "going down to the chambers of death" (v. 27).

## Lust in the New Testament

Jesus spoke about lust in a way that has challenged Christians for two millennia. "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:27). With these words, Jesus changed the playing field regarding sin. No longer could sin be viewed only as something related to actions; the interior life must be examined as well.

The Greek word *epithymia*, translated "lust," appears several dozen times in the New Testament. The word means desire, longing, passion, craving, or to set one's heart upon something. It can also mean inordinate desire or lust. Because *epithymia* can refer to any kind of desire, the New Testament writers often coupled it with adjectives or other descriptors that further describe what they are referring to:

- "desires of flesh and senses" (Eph. 2:3)
- "lustful passion" (1 Thess. 4:5)

- "senseless and harmful desires" (1 Tim. 6:9)
- "youthful passions" (2 Tim. 2:22)
- "slaves to various passions" (Titus 3:3)
- "desires that you formerly had in ignorance" (1 Pet. 1:14)
- "desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul" (1 Pet. 2:11)
- "corruption that is in the world because of lust" (2 Pet. 1:4)
- "depraved lust" (2 Pet. 2:10)
- "licentious desires of the flesh" (2 Pet. 2:18)

All the quotations in that list are from the New Revised Standard Version. In earlier translations, *epithymia* in these passages was sometimes or often translated "lust" in place of "desire" or "passion."

First John contains one of the most vivid biblical passages about lust:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world passes away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides for ever. (1 John 2:15–17 RSV)

Given the strength of that statement, it cannot be surprising that the early church spent so much time trying to define lust and limit sexual pleasure.

Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame  
Is lust in action; and till action, lust  
Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame,  
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;  
Enjoy'd no sooner but despised straight;  
Past reason hunted; and no sooner had,  
Past reason hated, as a swallowed bait,  
On purpose laid to make the taker mad:  
Mad in pursuit, and in possession so;  
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;  
A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe;  
Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.  
All this the world well knows; yet none knows well  
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

William Shakespeare, Sonnet 129

Most of the times the New Testament writers used the word *epithymia*, they seemed to be referring to harmful desires, but in a good number of other instances the word simply meant “desire.” For example, in Luke 22:15, Jesus said that he desired to eat the Passover meal with his disciples, and in Philippians 1:23, Paul wrote that he desired to depart and be with Christ.

The variety of meanings associated with the word so often translated as “lust” raises several significant questions. To what extent, and in what settings, is sexual desire a healthy, life-giving desire, much like Jesus’ desire to eat a celebratory meal with his disciples or Paul’s desire to be with Christ? What turns a healthy desire into something that wages war with the soul? What are the characteristics of any kind of desire when it becomes inordinate or disordered, including sexual desire? And when the New Testament writers refer to “youthful lusts” or “senseless and harmful desires,” to what extent are they referring to sexual desire? Earlier translators believed they meant sexual desire, but is that accurate? Could they be referring to other kinds of desire as well?

## Chastity

Because Christians want to get beyond condemning sin in order to encourage positive and life-giving patterns of life, the choice of words to describe healthy sexuality matters. What words can we use to describe sexual desire when it is not disordered?

Chastity was proposed by many Christian writers as the antithesis to lust. Augustine viewed chastity as a well-ordered way of thinking about sex, and John Cassian viewed it as a state of the heart. In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas described chastity as having both literal and metaphorical meaning. In its literal sense, to Aquinas it meant appropriate and reasonable sexual behavior for one’s position in life: celibacy outside of marriage, and within marriage a sexual relationship that enabled procreation, proper child rearing, and loving affection between husband and wife. This chaste sex, for Aquinas, was a moral good. Metaphorically, to Aquinas chastity meant faithfulness to one’s union with Christ, not chasing after the things of this world, a meaning that has parallels with the Old Testament prophets and with 1 John 2:15–17.

In our time, chastity in relation to sexuality has come to mean two different things. It can have the sense that

A characteristic of lust, and of our sexually provocative popular culture, is to exaggerate the importance of sex in life. To a certain extent this is a reaction against earlier puritanical attitudes. . . . But to give the impression, in advertising and the mass media, that happiness depends upon being forever sexually attractive and fulfilled, is to propagate a grand lie. . . . Lust falsely asserts that love in the absence of sex is not possible and that sex satisfies in the absence of love.

Solomon Schimmel<sup>3</sup>

Thomas Aquinas gave it, appropriate sex within marriage and celibacy outside of marriage. It is also often used simply to mean celibacy. This confusion of meaning is part of why talking about chastity today needs ample clarification to be helpful.

The Reformers, such as Calvin and Luther, saw sexuality as a part of being human and rejected the emphasis on celibacy (sometimes called chastity) as the highest goal of Christian spiritual living. To Calvin, sex in marriage was a gift from God to enable people to live with their sexual desires. Luther celebrated sexuality more openly, but also asserted that sexuality was a force that needed proper direction.

News items connected to disordered human sexuality show clearly that sex continues to be a force that needs proper direction. Perhaps chastity can be a helpful concept for discussing the limits and proper direction needed for healthy expressions of sexuality. Perhaps the language of lust and chastity can be a helpful way to engage in discussing this complex issue, simply because those words raise so many interesting questions.

We urgently need more discussion in Christian settings about the good gift of sexuality, rejecting the emphasis, so common in Christian history, of human sexuality as inherently dirty or sinful. At the same time, we also need wide-ranging discussion and creative thinking about appropriate Christian responses to the disordered sexuality so visible in Western culture today, expressed in this quotation from *The Seven Deadly Sins* by Solomon Schimmel: “Sexual pleasure and its anticipation often blind us to the voice of reason and suppress our inclinations to do what we know to be right. Unrestrained sexual passion will induce us to act in ways

that to an objective observer are irrational, immoral, and self-destructive."<sup>4</sup>

## About the Writer

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## Endnotes

1. Simon Blackburn, *Lust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2.
2. Sara Paretsky, "Soft Spot for Serial Murder," *New York Times*, April 28, 1991.
3. Solomon Schimmel, *The Seven Deadly Sins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 129, 132.
4. Schimmel, *Seven Deadly Sins*, 118.