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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“BUT I SAY: LUST”
Matthew 5:27-30

? When was the first time you were exposed to pornographic images?

For me it was in 1974 or '75. I was eight or nine years old when a neighbor introduced me to that world.

☑ I was younger than most, but not by a lot. In 1986 the Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography reported that the largest group of porn users consisted of boys between the ages of 12 and 17. The typical age of first exposure was 11 years old.

That was before the internet became a fixture in our lives. Since then, the percentage of girls who view porn has skyrocketed, and it is easier to find hardcore material.

Maybe *you* have never stumbled on it accidentally, much less sought it out. If so, give thanks to God!

? But have you ever lusted? As pernicious as pornography is, it is not the basic problem; lust is.

■ Please turn with me to Matthew 5:27-28.

First things first: the initial clauses of these verses are, respectively, **“You have heard that it was said”** and **“But I tell you.”** The Lord Jesus uses this set of clauses six times in chapter 5.

We explored it at length last Sunday. If you missed that message you may want to pick up a hard copy in the narthex or read it on our website.

{Mt 5:17} To summarize, by saying **“You have heard that it was said... But I tell you”** Messiah asserts mastery over Scripture. He claims the authority and capacity to affirm, limit, expand and reframe Scripture. His interpretation, his teaching, and his application of the Bible are definitive.

■ Back to verse 27: **“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’”** That is a word-for-word quote of Exodus 20:14 and Dt 5:18.

■ Next, verse 28: **“But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”**

Lust is equally wrong for males and females. Nevertheless, Jesus aims this teaching squarely at men, and with good reason.

① {WS Chung, Medscape} First, males respond more quickly and compulsively than females to visual stimulation. The research confirms this.

② Second, as a group, males inflict more harm on others because of lust than females do.

③ {Lev 20:10} Third, males are often unjustly spared the consequences of lust. The account in John 8 is a case-in-point: when a woman is **“caught in adultery”** some Pharisees propose to execute her, but not her male partner. It is interesting that they say, **“In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women”** – even though the law explicitly stipulates that **“the adulterer and the adulteress are” “both” “to be put to death.”**

Jesus does not identify same-sex lust as an issue. Most likely this is because it was so widely

condemned in first century Jewish culture. Lust is wrong regardless of sexual orientation.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

The phrase translated **“lustfully”** literally reads **“with a view to desire.”** We are not talking about a passing glance, a reflexive attraction, or the aesthetic appreciation of fine art. Such **“looks”** are not wrong.

📖 What is in sight here is any intentional look that is calculated to arouse sexual appetite for anyone apart from your spouse. That is sinful.

This always includes the use of pornography which, after all, is produced for the purpose of provoking lust. It always includes sexualized ogling, blatant or furtive, whether in public places or at so-called “gentlemen’s clubs” or through the victim’s window.

It might, or might not, include watching some non-explicit scenes in movies and on TV and listening to songs with suggestive lyrics.

But let’s not kid ourselves: everyone who reaches a particular stage of development is capable of lusting independently. We don’t need outside input.

A moment ago I used the phrase *“might, or might not.”* Individuals respond differently. For example, to one Christ Follower a given movie scene is innocently romantic while to another the same scene is highly provocative.

❓ Pornography and ogling are out of bounds, period. But how shall we distinguish what is right and what is wrong for us in the gray areas?

There are two easy self-assessments, which are especially helpful when used in tandem.

★ The subjective assessment is a gut-check: do the images and ideas that this content evokes *feel* like lust? If so, avoid it!

★ The objective assessment is the performance test: how would God respond if you acted out the images being evoked in you? If he would disapprove, avoid it!

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

This is not prudery! Biblical faith is not anti-sex.

The LORD God highly values human sexuality and imbued it with vast creative power. But misused, its power to destroy is in direct proportion to its power to create.

The LORD God values human sexuality and designed it to be exquisitely beautiful. But when perverted, its ugliness is in direct proportion to its innate beauty.

■ In verses 29-30 the Savior’s focus shifts to counsel: **“If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.”**

Allow me to state the obvious: Messiah is not promoting self-mutilation. That would not solve the problem, for even blind and limbless men can lust.

✎ He is underscoring this point: it is worth taking radical action to overcome lust. Freedom is worth prayer and fasting, worth immersion in Scripture, worth unsubscribing from cable or satellite service, worth installing filters, worth disposing of your computer, worth coming clean to an accountability partner, and worth receiving professional treatment.

Maybe you don't need drastic measures. If you do, it is worth shedding blood, sweat, and tears – for the cost exacted by unrestrained lust is far greater.

“It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into γεενναν [géennan].”

Gehenna is a ravine just south of Jerusalem. During the reigns of Ahaz and Manasseh, people sacrificed children to pagan gods there. Later, the valley was turned into a garbage dump and columns of smoke rose perpetually from the burning refuse.

Most English language translations render γεενναν as **“hell,”** and appropriately so. If we do not repent of lust and live by God's grace, we will be subject to final judgment.

But hell is not only a future reality. Those who are consumed by lust have one foot in Gehenna now, and they often pull others into the flames with them.

It is hard to quantify the impact of lust, *per se*. Not so with pornography, which is lust boiled down to its

hideous quintessence. A growing body of verified evidence corroborates that porn has tremendous potential to ruin lives, destroy marriages, and rip families apart. Most users are not violent, but porn is a factor in the majority of sexual assaults and child molestation cases.

I began to change with my first exposure, and it got worse with subsequent viewings. Once I finally got away from my neighbor I had no access to porn, but the damage was done. Lust had taken root and it gripped my soul.

☑ {Blackburn} My inner world was extremely dark. I was eaten alive by frustration, anger, loneliness, self-loathing and despair. It was **“like living shackled to a lunatic.”**

Yet there is no hunger so insatiable God cannot satisfy it, no chains so strong God cannot break them, no pit so deep God cannot lift us out of it!

I have scars from the past which might not go away. Sometimes, I lust. But that is not my dominant behavior. The changes have not come quickly or easily but, by the grace of God, my inner world is substantially different.

I am free and I am whole. Anyone can be!

At its core, lust is an issue of *disordered* love. It is ερωσ [erōs] (erotic love) that has rebelled against and run roughshod over αγαπη [agapē] love. Hence, the fundamental long-term solution is to *reorder* love by bringing ερωσ into proper alignment under αγαπη.

Αγάπη is supernatural in origin, relational in orientation, and practical in expression. To restore store it to its rightful place we must take these qualities into account.

Positively, this means drawing close to Jesus (who embodies αγαπη), cultivating healthy non-sexual relationships, and actively exercising compassion, mercy, and justice.

Negatively, it means eliminating anything that distances us from Jesus, inhibits healthy non-sexual relationships, or hardens our hearts to others.

For married couples, reordering love also entails renewing one's commitment, reforming one's vision of marriage, rebuilding trust, and restoring sacredness to physical intimacy.

When lust has reached the level of addiction, professional help is absolutely necessary.

In all these things the key to overcoming lust is walking in αγαπη love with Jesus and with others, especially brothers and sisters in the Church.

If you are trapped in γεννα, if you are caught up in lust, *and* if you have even an inkling of what it means to walk in αγαπη love not only with Messiah but also with his people, then to you this might sound about as comfortable as gouging out your right eye or as easy as cutting off your right hand.

It isn't easy. I know. But as frightening and painful as that is, **"It 'is better... than...to be thrown into hell."**

Matthew 5:27-30 is the word of the Lord.