

Bridled Passion

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Ephesians 4:17-24

Sermon Series:
Seven Greatest
Virtues and Vices:
Pride and Humility

It [lust] is unbridled desire of any kind for that which is outside of bounds of the behavior that honors God and blesses people.

In our summer series, we are talking about the seven deadly sins and the seven lively virtues. So there is the sin of pride and the virtue of humility. The sin of lust and the virtue of chastity. The sin of envy and the virtue of kindness, and so on. The preaching schedule of who preaches when here at VPC is set according to dates and not according to topics. So, when I learned the schedule called for me to preach today, I did not know which of the seven deadly sins would land on this day. I was hoping for gluttony. I know a little bit about that. Or greed. Let me preach about greed! That's a no-brainer. So, I draw the topic of lust. Frankly, outside of lust for money, power, fame, Jaguar XKE sports cars, Mini-Coopers, beachfront properties, 65-inch HDTVs, potato chips and lemon meringue pies, I have never had much of a problem with lust, and surely you haven't either. You could say that I am confusing lust with greed, gluttony and covetousness. Well, if pride is the queen of all vices according to Pope Gregory in 590 AD, then lust is the king of all the vices and is embedded in every single one of them!

Consider some characteristics of lust. In our biblical text for this morning, speaking of those who are unconnected with the person of Jesus, the apostle Paul says, "They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity" (Ephesians 4:19). As William Barclay puts it, "[they] practice the lust of their desires... [lust is] the irresistible desire to have what we have no right to have." It may be lust for money, but it could be lust for sex, lust for power. It can be lust for anger, lust for resentment. Lust happens where you yield yourself to passions that consume you. So, we see that lust is unbridled passion, as there is no bridle, no control. It is unbridled desire of any kind for that which is outside of bounds of the behavior that honors God and blesses people. The Apostle John spoke of the "lust of the eyes." Lust starts with your eyes. You see it with your physical eyes or your mind's eye—money, sex, power, possessions, food, anger, resentment, whatever, and you want it with unbridled, unmanageable passion; that's lust.

A characteristic of lust is that it deludes you with respect to its consequences and it controls you.

Of course, this does not say passion is always out of bounds. When we use the word “chaste” or “chastity,” we speak of a person who expresses his or her intimate physical passion solely within the bounds of marriage between a husband and a wife. When you read the Song of Solomon in the Old Testament, you see right away that marriage is the place for very strong sexual attraction to be played out. You could call it a “bridled passion,” because it happens within the appropriate boundaries of the marriage between a man and a woman. Lust is an unbridled passion for anything that consumes you to the point that you no longer care about the consequences, which is why the apostle Paul uses the word “abandoned” as in “they abandoned themselves to licentiousness, immorality and decadence.” It is what Pastor Pete calls the complete anti-God state of mind.

Chip and Dan Heath are authors of the book Switch, which is about the topic “how to change things when change is hard.” They describe the work of University of Virginia psychologist Jonathan Haidt in his book The Happiness Hypothesis, where Haidt describes our emotional side as an elephant and our rational side as the rider on the elephant. So the Heath brothers write, “Perched atop the Elephant, the Rider holds the reins and seems to be the

leader. But the Rider’s control is precarious because the Rider is so small relative to the Elephant. Anytime the six-ton Elephant and the Rider disagree about which direction to go, the Rider is going to lose. He’s completely overmatched.”¹ If we use that image for the deadly sin of lust we see that when the Elephant is unbridled with an all-consuming desire, the rider has no control at all. That’s lust. And something is going to get trampled. There will be consequences.

A characteristic of lust is that it deludes you with respect to its consequences and it controls you. In our biblical text, the Apostle Paul says, “You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and *deluded* by its lusts” (Ephesians 4:22). To be deluded means you think you are fine but you are not. The thing about lust is that it blinds you to its consequences, and even if you are aware of the consequences, lust could care less about the consequences, and its consequences always destroy. They destroy you, they destroy the well-being of other people, and they destroy your relationships. Which tells you right away, the best way to deal with lust is to avoid it all together, because once you yield to it, it controls you even if you believe it doesn’t control you. The elephant wins and

¹ Chip Heath & Dan Heath Switch: How to change things when change is hard p. 7

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tramples. Lust cares not for its consequences.

We have seen a number of people in the news recently whose lives, careers and families have been compromised by the consequences of some lust-driven behavior, whether outside the bounds of marriage or for financial gain at the expense of others, and so on. People say, “How could they be so stupid? Or so abusive? Or so harmful?” It’s really very simple. Lust is a runaway unbridled elephant that tramples on all in its path. A salesman rang the doorbell in a suburban home. The door opened to reveal a nine-year-old boy puffing away on a long, black cigar. Trying to cover his amazement, the salesman said, “Good morning, sonny. Is your mother in?” The boy removed the cigar from his mouth, flicked off its ashes and replied, “What do you think?” Lust may actually be aware of the consequences. It just doesn’t care.

To talk and think about the nature of lust, to consider the nature of any of the seven deadly sins requires a profound humility. It’s easy, this particular deadly sin of lust, to see it in others and point fingers, but our Lord has said, “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?”² So today is not about what other people’s lust has done to damage their lives or to damage your life

with its betrayal and heartache. Today, our focus is on how to deal with our own lust for money, sex, power and even anger and resentment and other matters of the spirit and the corresponding virtues of chastity and self-control.

So what do we do? If lust is unbridled passion, we put the bridle on. How do we do that?

Step one: Stay close to Jesus. The only bridle that actually controls the elephant of lust is the bridle of the Spirit of God. If lust is the anti-God state of mind, first we start with God. In our text for today, the apostle Paul speaks of those deluded by every form of impurity and then says, “That is not the way you learned Christ! For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus” (Ephesians 4:20-21). So, we put the bridle on our passions by staying close to Jesus. The lust of the eyes will beat you every time unless your eyes are focused and fixed on the person of Jesus, who loves you, who forgives you, who understands you and who fills you with his Spirit. Of the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit, the last one is self-control, the controlling power of the will under the operation of the Spirit of God. It’s the only bridle we can depend on.

Staying close to Jesus also helps you to remember that our Lord loves you more than you love your own next breath. When you yield to lust of some

² Matthew 7:3

When you turn back to the God who loves you, confessing your sin and opening yourself to the Lord of your life, you will discover His loving embrace has never turned from you.

sort, the Spirit of God will bring you to your senses. Remember, every Sunday when we pray the prayer of confession of our sins and receive an assurance of pardon, those aren't just words. When you turn back to the God who loves you, confessing your sin and opening yourself to the Lord of your life, you will discover His loving embrace has never turned from you.

Step Two: Avoid Slippery Places. I have a sister whose life has been saved by Alcoholics Anonymous and, after ten years with them, I am immensely proud of her. One day we were talking about various addictive behaviors that people in our wider family and friends have struggled with and she began to tell me of a core idea within AA: "Stay away from slippery people and slippery places." What is a slippery place? It's a place where you know you run the real risk of slipping, of tripping up, of yielding to lust in one of its forms. A young man received the following note from his former girlfriend: "Dear John, I have been unable to sleep ever since I broke our engagement. Won't you forgive and forget? Your absence leaves a void nobody else can ever fill. I love you. I love you. I love you. Your adoring Susan. P.S. Congratulations on winning the lottery."³ A

slippery place is a place in which, ultimately, you only think about you.

Perhaps the biggest issue with avoiding slippery places is our tendency to deny our lust is unbridled passion, our assumption, "I can handle it," "It's no problem," when, indeed, you are just lying to yourself. If screen images are a slippery place, don't watch HBO, never glance at certain websites or even spam emails. If it's alcohol or drugs or whatever else that is found in a place that unbridles your passion, *get out of there!* And beyond slippery places, perhaps there are slippery faces in your life—people who inspire unbridled, unmanageable passion in your life in ways that are out of bounds. Do every appropriate thing to guard yourself.

Step 3: Have an Accountability Partner. A way to help you avoid slippery places and slippery faces is by having an accountability partner. This is a person whom you trust deeply, a person with whom you may be very open about the struggles in your own life. A good friend of mine suggests the best accountability partner is a person of your gender and age who shares your faith in Jesus, who lives in a different state, whose only aim is your well-being and that is your only aim for him/her. When you find yourself confronted with

³ James "Doc" Blakely et al. How the Platform Professionals Keep'em Laugh-I n

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slippery situations, then agree with your accountability partner to check in regularly with each other. I find the seven accountability questions of Chuck Swindoll to be very helpful:

1. Have you been with a man or a woman anywhere this past week that might be seen as compromising or inappropriate?
2. Have any of your financial dealings lacked integrity?
3. Have you exposed yourself to any explicit material?
4. Have you spent adequate time in prayer and Bible study?
5. Have you fulfilled the mandates of your calling?
6. Have you given priority time to your family?
7. Have you just lied to me?⁴

Step 4: Get Help.

Some years ago, Keith Miller wrote a book with a curious title, Habitations of Dragons, a phrase out of the Book of Isaiah. He pictures your mind like a great lake in Scotland, a loch of Scotland, a calm, placid, pleasant lake, when all of a sudden a dragon erupts from the water, your personal Loch Ness monster. It

may be lust for money or sex or power or booze or control or resentment or something. The blunt and direct question is, “Do you bridle the monster or does it bridle you?” Keith Miller says to gain power over the dragon, you have to name it. Quit denying it.

If you cannot control the dragon, you fall into what we call the pit. The pit is an abyss you cannot crawl out of by yourself, because there is a lust in your life you cannot control, and it is cancer to your spirit. What kinds of pits? The pit of addiction to drugs, alcohol or other matters. The pit of pornography. The pit of romantic emotional bonding with someone not your spouse. The financial pit where obsession for money is your inescapable reality. The pit of unending anger or resentment. Those pits radically teach us that we have nothing to offer Jesus but our empty hands of faith and that our only hope to get out of the pit is to ask for help.

This does require the humility. Step One of the Twelve Steps of AA: We admitted we were powerless over alcohol [or whatever the “dragon of lust” is]—that our lives had become unmanageable. That’s humility. Frankly, the humility we need to ask for help is hard for some of us. Some years ago, I threw my back out and was having difficulty walking without pain. I went to visit a 90-year-old woman who was shut in her apartment. I told her I had to go

⁴ Chuck Swindoll, Swindoll’s Ultimate Book of Illustrations and Quotes, p. 9.

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- Corrie Ten Boom

to the airport the next day and I was worried about how I was going to walk down those long concourses. She looked me in the eye and said, “Young man, check your ego at the door and ask for a wheelchair.” She was so right. I checked my “I can do this by myself” ego at the door and found the wheelchair was a godsend.

Corrie Ten Boom used to say, “There is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still.” And while that is very true, you can find yourself pretty far down in a very deep pit. So check your ego at the door. Ask for help. There are people who can help you. Thank God ours is the Lord who lifts you up!

“I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord” (Psalm 40:1-3).

O’ Lord, when lust is the elephant or dragon in our lives, we pray for the grace to stay close to Jesus, the courage to avoid slippery places and faces, the wisdom to get an accountability partner and the humility to ask for help! Amen.