

Battling the Unbelief of Lust

by John Piper

The battle against lust is a battle against unbelief, and the way to fight lust is by feeding faith with the knowledge of an irresistibly glorious God.

Duration: 31:46

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 4:1

Topics: "Overcoming Lust", "Spiritual Warfare"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of fighting lust by feeding faith with the knowledge of an irresistibly glorious God. He encourages the audience to engage in week by week growth in knowing God through meditating on His Word, reading solid books about His character, and associating with God-focused individuals. The speaker urges the audience to pray daily, with fasting if necessary, for God to awaken their hearts and enable them to be captivated by His glory, overpowering any temptations towards pornography. He concludes with the story of a man who found victory over lust and highlights the biblical definition of lust and the eternal danger it poses.

Transcript

The scripture lesson this morning is taken from 1 Thessalonians, chapter 4, verses 1 through 8. 1 Thessalonians 4, 1 through 8. We beseech and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you learn from us how you ought to live and to please God, just as you are doing, you do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification, that you abstain from immorality, that each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God, that no man transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we solemnly forewarned you.

For God has not called us for uncleanness, but in holiness. Therefore, whoever disregards this, disregards not man, but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you. Let's begin with a biblical definition of lust.

This would be the one that I suggest, and then I'll try to show you where I get it from in this text. Lust is a sexual desire that dishonors its object and disregards God. Lust is a sexual desire that dishonors its object and disregards God.

Let's look at verse 4. Now, the Revised Standard Version says that each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the heathen who do not know God.

The NIV is different. It says that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen who do not know God.

And the New American Standard Bible is different yet. It says that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion like the Gentiles who do not know God. Now, I think that the Revised Standard Version is right in translating it to take a wife as opposed to control your own body, and I've got a list of five reasons from the context here why I think that, but I'm going to pass over those reasons and not try to persuade you of that because it does not matter for the point that I'm going to make this morning, namely what the definition of lust is and how to fight it.

And I think you'll be able to see that if I just draw your attention back to verse four and show you that whatever it means, it means something should be done in one way but not another way. So whether it's take a wife or whether it's control your body or vessel, it says do it in holiness and honor, literal translation, not in the passion of lust. And so there's a very clear contrast between the way you do this.

Do it in holiness and honor and that's contrasted with not in the passion of lust. And so very clearly then there emerges a meaning for what lust is. Lust is a sexual desire minus honor and holiness.

Now sexual desire is good. Let's just settle that at the outset. God thought it up.

God created it. God made it. It has its proper ordained place in his creation.

It's good. He meant it to be governed or regulated or channeled and guided by two higher commitments. The commitment to honor people and the commitment to revere God in holiness.

So let's just take those one at a time and think about them for a moment. God established a relationship called marriage at the outset of creation. The intention of that relationship was to be one man, one woman, forming a lifelong covenant in which they commit themselves to honor each other as the heirs of life together.

Therefore, to say to another person, I want you to satisfy my sexual desire, but I don't want you as a covenant partner is the same as saying, I want your body for my pleasure, but I don't want you as a whole person. And that's dishonoring and that's lust. Lust is sexual desire minus a commitment to honor a person in covenant relationship.

Let's look at the second feature of lust, namely the absence of holiness or the absence of a supreme regard for the holiness of God. It says here in verse 4, do this, whether it's take a wife or whether it's control your body, do this in holiness, not in the passion of lust. Now, holiness has to do with God.

It has to do with being set apart for God, right? We all know that basic biblical concept of being set apart for God. Verse 5, therefore, goes on like this, not in the passion of lust like the heathen who don't know God. Lust comes from not knowing God, having no regard for God, not holding him as the supremely holy one and important one in your life.

Look at verse 8, same point is going to be made here. Therefore, whoever disregards this, this, namely this call for holiness, whoever disregards this call for holiness, disregards not man, but God, who gives his holy spirit to you. So the root issue in lust is whether you regard God with your sexual desires.

Do you have a supreme regard for God or is God disregarded when it comes to lust or sexual desire? So here's my definition of lust. Lust is taking a perfectly good thing that God created, namely sexual desire, and abstracting it or stripping it off from an honor toward people, a person, and stripping it off from a supreme regard for God in holiness. You take God away and you take the honor of man away and what you've got left in sexual desire is lust.

That's my definition of lust. Second question this morning. So what? That's the question of our culture.

So what? I mean, come on, let's deal with something important like nuclear arms or justice. Get off this personal piety, these private individual choices that have no relevance for what's going on in this world that's crashing down around us. Get up where it counts.

Know anybody like that? They say what counts is whether you boycott companies in South Africa, whether you oppose Star Wars defense systems, sleeping around, not to mention just thinking about it, sleeping around is no big deal if you're on the picket line at Honeywell. It's no big deal to flip through Playboy magazine if you're on the airplane flying to peace talks in Geneva. I mean, you're talking about teeny, insignificant things.

They're not important what you do with your brain in regard to sex or what you do with your body in your own personal relationship with another person. What's important is big things like nuclear arms and justice. That's the way the religious mind reasons when it has forsaken a supreme regard for God.

That's the way the religious mind reasons when a supreme regard for God and His Word have been forsaken. God has a different message than that, and it's found in verse 6. That no man transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we solemnly forewarned you. This means that the consequences of lust are going to be worse than the consequences of nuclear war.

All that nuclear war can do is kill 5 billion bodies. And Jesus said very, very plainly, Jesus said very, very plainly, Do not fear him who kills the body and after that has nothing that he can do. Rather, fear him who after killing the body can cast soul and body into hell.

Yes, I tell you, fear him. So if this text says that God is going to be the avenger on those who ignore the warnings against lust, then I think I can say with the complete authority of the Bible, the consequences of lust are 10 million times greater than the consequences of nuclear holocaust. The only reason for denying that would be unbelief in eternity.

If you're secular through and through, if you're humanist through and through, if man is the center of your life and his span on this earth is it, what I'm saying right now is, of course, hogwash. If you are God centered, if the Bible is the word of God, and if this text is in the Bible, then the response, come on, deal with something significant is irrational and insane. Because how you deal with lust has to do with where you spend eternity.

And that's a long, long time. I was in Wheaton, remember back in September, and I spoke at the Wheaton Christian High School. And I didn't know what I was going to talk about when I left.

And I asked you to pray. And the night before I decided to speak on 10 lessons against lust. I said, you can't miss if you talk to high schoolers about sex.

So 10 lessons on how to fight lust. And they listened. Lesson number six was ponder the eternal danger of lust.

That was lesson number six in my artillery. And I simply quoted Jesus. You have heard that it was said, you shall not commit adultery.

But I say to you, whoever looks upon a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart. If your right eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it away. For it is better to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

And I simply said, does that not mean that heaven and hell are at stake in the way you fight lust? And as soon as I was done, a girl made a beeline for me. And you know what question she asked right at the front of the auditorium? She said, are you saying that a person can lose his salvation? Exactly. Almost to the very words, the response I got from a man three years ago who came to me in adultery.

And I counseled him to get out of it and return to his wife who was willing to have him back. He resisted and I said to him, don't you realize that if you don't fight this sin, you'll go to hell. His mouth dropped open.

He got a look of utter disbelief on his face. And he said, you mean you think I could lose my salvation? Week in and week out I run into this. People who have been taught that there is a way to abstract saving faith from everything in your life.

It doesn't matter how you live. You made a choice to walk an aisle or pray a prayer or sign a card once upon a time. And you're home free living like the devil.

And it's a lie and it's everywhere. And I'll stop right here to insert an advertisement. Many of you listen to John MacArthur on the radio.

Some of you like him. Some of you don't. He's written a book called The Gospel According to Jesus.

It's going to be very, very popular and controversial. I've only read 56 pages of it and it is excellent. And it takes on this doctrine that is shot through our evangelical churches today with explicit quotations from where they're coming from and dealing with them biblically.

So if the rest of the book is as good as the first 56 pages, it's going to have my unqualified endorsement. And I'm going to try to get into all your hands before we're done, because we are in the midst of great deception. Let me try to restate the simple words of Jesus.

Jesus said, if you don't fight lust, you will go to hell. I'll say it again. I think those are simple enough for every child in this room to understand.

If you don't fight lust, you will go to hell forever. And that's worse than bombs. That's worse than bombs.

Are we then saved by faith? The question comes back. Are we then saved by faith, not by works, lest any man should boast? And the answer is, indeed we are, by persevering in faith. How do you lay hold on eternal life? 1 Timothy 6.12, fight the fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life.

Now that brings us to the last concern that I have this morning, namely to show that the battle against lust is the battle against unbelief, or to put it positively, the fight for purity, sexual purity, purity of the imagination and the mind and heart, is a fight of faith. The error that I am trying to explode in these

messages week in and week out, is the error that faith in God and the fight for holiness are different things. That's the error that I'm attacking.

That says faith in God and the fight for holiness are separate things. And only this one is important to get to heaven. I'm trying to explode the error that faith gets you to heaven and holiness gets you rewards.

I'm trying to explode the doctrine that you get your justification by faith and you get your sanctification by something different works. I'm trying to explode the doctrine that says you start the Christian life in a humble reliance on the power of the spirit, but you press on in the Christian life by the efforts of the flesh. I'm trying to explode the doctrine that the battle for obedience is optional because only faith is necessary for salvation.

This is very tricky the way words are used here. Here's my response. The battle for obedience is absolutely necessary for salvation because it is the fight of faith.

That's the point of these 13 messages. Every week, same point. The battle for obedience is absolutely necessary for getting to heaven because it is the battle against unbelief.

It is the fight of faith. There are not two battles. One to get yourself saved by a single act of faith and the other to collect rewards by works.

There is only one battle. It's the one that gets you started. It's the one that gets you there and it's the fight of faith, not works.

Faith is what severs the root of covetousness, misplaced shame, anxiety, lust, and tonight, envy, and six more before we're done this year. There is one warfare and it is the warfare of faith. And so all we have left to do then this morning is to find from this text, and I wish we had time to gather in many others, that the root cause of lust, not sexual desire, the root cause of the ruination of sexual desire in lust is unbelief in God.

He breaks the power of canceled sin. He sets the prisoner free. His blood can make the foulest clean.

His blood availed for me. He breaks the power of canceled sin. You have a half gospel is if all you preach is the power of, is the cancellation of sin and not victory over it.

Sin shall no more have dominion over you, for you are not under law, but under almighty, sovereign, powerful grace. Romans 6.14. Let's go to verse five and I'll try to demonstrate for you why I think this text teaches that the root cause of lust is unbelief. Verse five says, take a wife or control your body, not in the passion of lust like the heathen or the Gentiles who do not know God.

Now, do you see what that implies about the root of lust? Not knowing God is the root cause of lust. Not knowing God is the root cause of lust. Now, what does that mean? Let's just think about this.

What kind of knowledge is he talking about? You remember how much the demons knew in the ministry of Jesus? You remember in Mark 1.24, Jesus comes into a synagogue. There's a man there with an evil spirit. Jesus is ready to cast out that evil spirit.

And out of the mouth of that demon possessed man comes the words, I know who you are, the Holy One of God. The disciples didn't even know that. Do you realize how much the demons know? How accurate and large is their knowledge of God on many things? And yet they seethe with lust.

So that's not the kind of knowledge that's being spoken of here. You can pack your head with theological knowledge and go straight to hell. I used to go to professional theological meetings.

I remember one in St. Louis. And St. Louis has some pretty gross and grisly sexual streets in it. And what these men who teach theology in the universities around this country did, there is no connection between mere head knowledge and the power of godliness.

Mere head knowledge. So what does he mean when he says, when you give in to lust, you act like the Gentiles who don't know God? It's a different kind of knowledge. It's the knowledge described in 2 Corinthians 4, 6, where he says God has shown into our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

It's the knowledge of God's greatness, his grandeur, his glory, his beauty, his power, his wisdom, his justice, his goodness, his truth. It's a knowledge that humbles you and wins you and holds you. It's the knowledge of God that is very unlike mere head knowledge.

It's the knowledge that you don't have when you say ho-hum during the Hallelujah Chorus. It's the knowledge that you don't have when you grumble on the rim of the Grand Canyon at sunset, hearing they do not hear and seeing they do not see. It's the knowledge that you have when you're like Lydia and the Lord has just opened the heart to give heed to the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ in the Gospel.

It's the knowledge that wins, holds, humbles, ravishes, enlightens, delights. It's the knowledge of faith, the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. That's the knowledge that liberates from lust, the knowledge which is faith.

It's a knowledge so real and so precious and so satisfying to your soul, that when any attitude or emotion or thought or addiction threatens to diminish your capacity to have and enjoy that knowledge, you fight it as though your very life were threatened, which it is. Do you remember 1 Peter 2.11? Abstain from lustful passions that wage war against your soul. Your life is at stake in the way you fight your enemy called lust.

I close with an illustration of a man who was in bondage to lust for ten years in the most gross forms, short of adultery, but who got victory. He wrote his story in an unsigned article in Leadership Magazine, which any of you can read in our library, Fall 1982. He was a religious man, and the story he tells is one of great tragedy, until something happens.

And I want to just tell you from a key paragraph what happened in his life. He discovered a book by Francois Mauriac, a Catholic French novelist, who wrote a book called What I Believe. In that book he had a chapter on sexuality and lust in particular, in which he described his own war against it as a little Catholic young man.

He says that all of the guilt that he experienced and all of the shame did not conquer lust in his life. Rather, he came to discover that one great power exists that can conquer lust, and that's the power described in the Beatitude, Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. The man who is writing this and reading that book wrote this paragraph, which describes his own discovery.

The thought hit me like a bell, rung in a dark, silent hall. So far, none of the scary negative arguments against lust had succeeded in keeping me from it. But here was a description of what I was missing by continuing to harbor lust.

I was limiting my own intimacy with God. The love he offers is so transcendent and possessing that it requires our faculties to be purified and cleansed before we can experience or can possibly contain all of it. Could he, in fact, substitute another thirst and another hunger for the one I had never filled? Would living water somehow quench lust? That was the gamble of faith.

And I wrote down here, it was no gamble. Because you cannot lose when you turn to God. There is no risk in turning to God.

The man turned and he did find deliverance. And the lesson that he learned is absolutely right. I want to sum up this final point with this lesson.

Namely, the way to fight lust is by feeding faith with the knowledge of an irresistibly glorious God. The way to fight lust is by feeding faith with the knowledge of an irresistibly glorious God. And so I close by asking all of you now, do you know God? Better perhaps I should say, are you engaged in week by week growth in knowing God? Do you meditate on God's Word day and night? Do you spend time focusing in on the snapshots of the image of God in His Son in the Gospels? Do you read great solid books that describe the character and the ways of God? Do you associate with people who are God besotted and God saturated? Are you praying daily, sometimes with fasting, that God would so awaken and quicken your heart that you would have the capacity to be ravished by the irresistible glory of God with emotion and a movement and a joy overpowering all the passions that can go out towards pornography.

Are you engaged in the warfare at that level? If not, I invite you right now as we close in prayer to make those commitments. To resolve in your heart if this is right, if knowing God in all His irresistible glory is the way to push this junk out of my life. I want God.

I want to be greedy for God. I want more of God than I've ever known if that's the way out of this bondage. You make that commitment and you follow those guidelines and God will meet you in a mighty way as you enter into warfare with this mortal enemy.

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