

## *The Capital Sin of Lust*

### THE BED WAS ON FIRE

A fireman saved a drunken man from a burning motel. The drunk was formally charged with drunkenness and arson. He had apparently passed out or fallen asleep while smoking a cigarette. When he appeared in court before the judge, he explained his innocence, saying, “Your Honor, the bed was on fire when I laid down on it.”

### THE RAGING FIRE

Most of the time when we think of lust, we think of a blazing fire that we don’t have much control over. But, like the drunk who set the motel on fire, we have a great deal of control over the fire of passion. The capital sin of lust is our letting the flames of passion get out of control. Better put, it is our refusal to accept and properly integrate the gift of sexuality God has given us. Lust is our denial of the human incompleteness that’s part of living. Lust is an inordinate love of pleasure, an idolatry of pleasure that tries to cover the pain of human incompleteness.

### SEXED FROM GOD AND OTHERS

Sexuality is a gift from God. It is a divine fire burning within our hearts that urges us toward relationships with other people and with God. We need to be in these relationships in order to have a foretaste of the completeness we’ll experience in heaven. No earthly relationship, however, can heal our feelings of being incomplete or being severed. The root of the words sex and sexuality is the Latin verb *secare*, which literally means, “to sever.” Therefore, something is “sexed” when it is cut off from something else. If I cut a piece of bread from a loaf, I would have sexed it. This is the experience of humanity. We have been sexed from God and from one another and feel incomplete. We ache within to be in relationship with others. Sexuality, then, is the energy and urge within us to be united with others and God. Unfortunately, the sin of lust erroneously seeks to find fulfillment through the exploiting of this gift from God. It ignores the fact that sexuality has more to do with emotional intimacy than with sexual relationships. And so, often times, we find ourselves further sexing ourselves from God and one another through the sin of lust.

## THE MANIFESTATIONS OF LUST

We live in a society that exploits sex as an end in and of itself, rather than as a means to greater union between spouses living in loving, committed, covenant relationships. The media is most often the leader in the exploitation of sexuality. We are all familiar with the phrase, “sex sells,” but in reality it is lust that sells. Commercials, television programs, radio ads, and movies all try to tap into the incompleteness we feel in our hearts. They present things that are sexually attractive in order to influence how we feel and what we think. Their objective is to get us to lust after the sexual objects they present to us, so that we also lust after the products, programs, and services they want to sell. And for the most part, we’ve bought into their doctrine. Evidence of this can be seen in the numerous “reality” shows that are currently at the top of the television ratings, shows like-- Temptation Island, Blind Date, Married by America, Joe Millionaire, Dismissed, Cheaters, Eliminate, Change of Heart, the Bachelor, and the Bachelorette. All of these highly popular shows frequently put lust before love, physical attraction before emotional and spiritual connection, artificiality before vulnerability, and sex before commitment. They show us regularly how lust can manifest itself in human lives.

Some of the more obvious manifestations of lust are—fornication, adultery, incest, masturbation, pornography and contraception. But some of the less obvious ones are—sensuality, immodesty, attachment, excessiveness, anger, indiscrimination, curiosity, and frustration. Ultimately, all lust is rooted in the frustration we feel about being incomplete. Ronald Rolheiser said it best when he asked, “How do we live in an incomplete world without demanding that our lives, our spouses, our friends, our homes, our vocations, and our jobs give us something that they cannot ultimately give, namely... full consummation?”<sup>1</sup>

## OVERCOMING LUST

Overcoming lust is directly proportional to our growing in chastity. Chastity is the virtue that allows us to fully accept and properly integrate the gift of our sexuality. Chastity understands that our sexuality has very little to do with genital sexual activity and everything to do with intimacy and love. This virtue leads us toward having an undivided heart and seeing God<sup>2</sup>, and growing in purity, temperance, and modesty.

There are several ways we can overcome lust and grow in chastity. First, we have to own up to our incompleteness. As long as we think in our heads or our hearts that we can achieve complete fulfillment here on earth we will search for it here on earth. We have to be willing, then, to go inward rather than outward when we feel the pain and incompleteness of life. In other words, we have to be willing to retreat to the inner quiet of prayer long enough to turn “restlessness to restfulness, compulsion to freedom, impatience to patience, self-absorption to altruism, and heartache to empathy.”<sup>3</sup> James expressed this method in his letter by writing, “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you men of double mind.... Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you” (James 4:7-10).

---

<sup>1</sup> Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing*, p. 204.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 5:8

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

There are moments of temptation, of course, when we don't have the time or the place to withdraw into quiet prayer. But prayer can still be helpful. In fact, praying the Scriptures can be a great source of strength when fighting against lust. Scripture is a two-edged sword that can slice through the temptations we feel.<sup>4</sup> Verses like the one we heard in today's Responsorial Psalm, "create in me a clean heart O God. Put a steadfast Spirit within me,"<sup>5</sup> can be very comforting when we're feeling weak and tempted. Having a verse like this one memorized and on the tip of our tongues can be a powerful tool to overcome sinful temptations and habits.

Ultimately, our overcoming the sin of lust, as with all sin, is a matter of desire. We can't respond to God's grace if we don't want to experience conversion in our lives. Sometimes, we have to honestly pray for God to give us the desire to want to change, the desire to want to be chaste. One old nun humorously explained how difficult it is not to desire and enjoy lust when she said, "I don't entertain dirty thoughts... they entertain me!"

## A HEALTHY SEXUALITY

Being a sexually healthy person requires us to face the reality of our painful incompleteness, and embrace it rather than try to escape it. People who repress their sexual feelings and impulses eventually become rigid, listless, and angry individuals. Overcoming lust has nothing to do with repressing our sexual feelings, but allowing them to urge us towards God and healthy, intimate relationships. Rather than acting on our lust, we can consciously choose these greater values and goals.

The drunken man who said, "The bed was on fire when I laid down on it," didn't want to take responsibility for the fire that almost cost him his life. As chaste Christians, you and I are challenged to take responsibility for the fire of passion that burns in our hearts, with the hope that the fire costs us our earthly lives, as we are consumed in sacrificial love, and not our eternal lives.

"What causes wars, and what causes fighting among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members? You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions."

--James 4:1-3

---

<sup>4</sup> Hebrews 4:12a "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword."

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 51:10.