

Lust and Love

Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18

Psalm 103

1 Corinthians 3:16-23

Matthew 5:38-48

An older monk and a younger monk were traveling together. At one point, they came to a river with a strong current. As the monks were preparing to cross the river, they saw a very young and beautiful woman also attempting to cross. The young woman asked if they could help her. The senior monk picked the woman up and carried her on his shoulder across the river. The junior monk was very upset, but said nothing. After walking for about an hour without talking, the younger monk finally spoke up and said, “As monks, we are not permitted to touch a woman. How could you carry that woman on your shoulders?” The senior monk replied, “I left the woman on the back of the river a long time ago, but you seem to still be carrying her.”

That story has been used by many people in many different settings to teach many different lessons. Today, I want to use it as an image of the difference between lust and love. The older monk in the story focused on *loving the woman* who needed his help, and therefore did not struggle with lust, while the younger monk was *concerned about lust* and ended up becoming preoccupied with the woman.

For the past month, we have been studying the “Theology of the Body,” by Pope John Paul II. We have looked at the two states, or vocations, in life—marriage and celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Last week, we looked at the important role of solitude in every vocation. This week, I want us to look at lust and love. Pope John Paul II wrote a significant amount of material in his “Theology of the Body” concerning how original sin brought with it a distortion in love that has manifested itself most frequently in lust. Additionally, he pointed out that Jesus Christ gave His life to provide us with an example, as well as the grace, to once again choose love rather than lust.

The very essence of God is love.¹ And, the fulfillment of every authentic vocation is love. Love can be defined as our desire for what is eternally best for another person. Therefore, love points our attention toward eternal life, a life with God forever. Lust, however, focuses our attention on the things of the earth. Lust can be defined as a disordered desire for selfish gratification. In this way, lust, rather than hate, is the opposite of love, and it is the greatest threat against the authentic living of the two vocations in life.

Pope John Paul II began his talks on lust and love in the “Theology of the Body” by looking at the Gospel of Matthew chapter five, verses 27-28, in which Jesus teaches—

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

-Matthew 5:27-28

Put into context, Jesus is reminding us that if we minimize morality to merely a set of rules to follow, then we will always be tempted to rationalize our behaviors. Instead, morality comes from within us, namely from the Spirit of God. External rules and guidelines are important since they remind us of the Spirit of God within us and encourage us to live in that new Spirit, but they should never become the motivation for our action.

¹ 1 John 4:8

Another important thing to note in this Scripture passage is that Jesus' words can be understood in two different ways. The Pope explains that they can be interpreted to mean that the person looking at the woman is looking with lust and, therefore, is committing a sin. They can also mean that a person who looks at a woman who is full of lust can be led into sin and that the woman, in being lustful, is also sinning. Therefore, it is a reminder to us that we must be chaste in the ways in which we view other people, as well as in our appearance and presentation.

Pope John Paul II then links these verses from Matthew chapter five to a verse in the first letter of John that speaks about the three forms of lust. The author of the first letter of John wrote, "For all that is in the world, sensual lust, enticement for the eyes, and a pretentious life, is not from the Father but is from the world" (1 John 2:16).

When this passage is put into a broader context, it becomes obvious that the author understood there to be three forms of lust—lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and pride of life. Sensual lust, or lust of the flesh, is the type of lust that most of us think of when we hear the word, "lust." It involves a disordered desire or appetite for sexual gratification that is selfish and void of love. Lust of the eyes means greed or coveting other people or other people's possessions. The final form of lust—pride of life—is much broader and reminds us that the root for every sin, including lust, is pride.

While the author of the first letter of John uses the image of the world vs. the Father, the more popular Scriptural image is the one that Saint Paul uses repeatedly—the flesh vs. the spirit. When we act in lust, we are living out of the influences and expectations of the world and the flesh, whereas, when we act in love, we are responding to the Father and living in the Spirit. Through original sin, humanity lost its original innocence. Because of this, we find it easy to be drawn into lust. Through Jesus Christ, however, we have an opportunity to grow in the ways of the Father and the ways of the Spirit and learn how to love.

The Pope makes it clear in the "Theology of the Body" that simply ridding ourselves of lust means we've missed the point. Lust cannot be suppressed or willfully rooted out of our lives. In fact, if our focus is on getting rid of lust, we will probably become preoccupied with it like the young monk. Instead, we are invited by Christ to choose to love, to grow in an appreciation for the beauty of creation without feeling the compulsion to diminish it, possess it, or manipulate it.

The Pope ended this section of the "Theology of the Body" by going back to the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew and referring to the Beatitude that says, "Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8). Lust keeps us from clearly seeing God because it is constantly inviting us to selfishly see only ourselves. Authentic love, however, looks at the "other," and in the case of God, it looks at the "Other," with a capital "O."

At various times in our lives, we will struggle with one or more of the forms of lust mentioned in the first letter of John. Rather than approaching such struggles with a willful hope to violently rip lust from our lives, we are invited to simply look for ways to gently and more deeply love others and God. That is what the older monk did in the story, and it helped him reverence and celebrate his own beauty and that of the woman he helped.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:

- ✚ Read the Song of Songs (a short book in the Old Testament). The story is written like a play, with the parts for the Groom (God, "G"), the Bride (us, "B"), and the chorus (the daughters of Jerusalem, "D") clearly marked. It is a story full of human sexuality and love, without a hint of lust. In our world, saturated in lust, the Song of Songs is a refreshing story of humanity, "naked without shame." After you read it, share with God what you think about it.