

Leviticus 19:15-18  
Luke 10:25-28  
I John 2:15-17

*A YEAR TO REMEMBER*  
WEEK FIFTEEN

## LUST

(THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS)

*PRIDE*

*ENVY*

*ANGER*

*SLOTH*

*GREED*

*GLUTTONY*

**LUST**

We begin a survey of the Seven Deadly Sins. Let us be wary, from the beginning, of a natural tendency to try and “make it” through this discussion with the hope of skirting as much blame as possible. My first reaction to any accusation is to defend against it. Everyone is guilty of all Seven of the Deadly Sins to some degree. We have been guilty in the past, we are at present, and we will be in the future. Moreover, none of us would even be alive today without some portion of each of the Seven, because they are necessary to our survival. The question is not “Can we get rid of them?” The question is “Can we stay aware of them, so they do not take us over?” Each of the Seven does the most damage when we are unaware of its presence – when we cannot see that it is at work within us.

So do not try to make it through these sermons with a verdict of “not guilty.” The verdict is “guilty,” and you are loved anyway. The verdict has been there all along, so there is nothing new to fear. If these meditations increase our awareness, if they put things in better balance, if in any way they strengthen the virtues or weaken the sins, then our lives will be better, happier, more productive, more joyful for it. The sins really are deadly. The virtues really are lively.

I am taking my order of the Seven Deadly Sins from the list of Gregory the Great, who lived from 540 to 604 A.D. and who is considered by many to be the greatest pope ever. I am taking them from the bottom to the top, meaning from the least important to the most important. Do not emphasize that distinction very much, however, or we will be into one of those childish games of “Would you rather be killed by a python or a tiger?” To make it into the list of the

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Top Seven, it has to be good – that is, good at what it does. Sin kills. Sin makes people unhappy, morose, despairing, and, finally, dead. To make it into the list of the Top Seven, a sin must be exceedingly effective.

Let's be clear then: Lust is at the bottom of the list, but that does not make it a pushover. Lust is still an ace at ruining life and killing the spirit within. Its position just means there are sins even more powerful or tougher to deal with. Frankly, that's the only reason I bring its position to your attention. I find it intriguing, to put it mildly, that the saints and pilgrims before us put lust in seventh place.

When I asked people to name the Seven Deadly Sins, nobody knew them all, but most people knew a few. Everybody who named *any* included lust on the list, even people you would think had never thought of it. Trying not to muse about what that says about our society, I would guess that if we were making the list today, we would put lust as number one or two. I am not sure we would call it a sin, however, and I am fairly certain we would not consider it deadly.

So here we go, into a search to comprehend the meaning of lust. Remember, we are not trying for a verdict of “not guilty.” We are trying to understand so that we can see the ways lust is still affecting our lives, holding them back, weighing them down.

Two men are driving home from work. Each is alone in his own car. It's bumper-to-bumper traffic at about 1.2 miles per hour. Both begin thinking, “If I could just win the lottery, I would not have to spend time in this commuter traffic anymore.” Then each one begins a “harmless fantasy” about what he would do with the money if he won the lottery.

The first man dreams of an island and a boat, of leisure time, of never having to worry about work, bills, or providing food ever again.

The second man dreams of being able to buy a controlling interest in the company he works for and making the changes he would like to make. He dreams of being able to run the company successfully, in his own way, without anybody telling him how or when.

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One of these men is having a fantasy of almost pure lust. By the way, this is not going to be a very sexy sermon. I hope you are not too disappointed. Lust is not about sex. It is about power. Lust is famous for playing in the arena of sex, but the issue is still about power.

Listen to the words we use when we apply lust to the area of sexuality: ravish, prowess, conquest. Lust turns sex into a power play instead of a relationship. In lust, sex is something to be taken or stolen, instead of something to be shared. The line is not fine, but sometimes it sounds like it. If two people who love each other decide to make love with a lustful theme in mind because they enjoy it and their trust for each other makes it truly safe, that is not deadly but delightful.

Back to the two men in bumper-to-bumper traffic. As you have figured out, the second man is indulging in a lustful fantasy. He is dreaming about having more power: power over his company; power to produce and accomplish things his own way. I chose what seems a very mild if not commendable illustration because it is clarifying. The first man illustrates greed and sloth. The second man is a picture of lust.

If the fantasies are light-hearted and infrequent, they will do only minor damage. If, by the time they arrive home, the two men shake the fantasies, smile at their foolishness, and return to the realities of their families, responsibilities, and real opportunities with gratitude and joy, then the daydreams will have done small damage indeed. Even if the men allow their fantasies to linger, ruining the evening with dour attitudes and discontent, that will be small harm in comparison to letting one of the Seven Deadly Sins have any real authority or room to maneuver in one's life.

Lust is about power, especially illegitimate power: power we claim for our own purposes; power we go after instead of waiting for it to be granted; power that is not assigned together with a clear task; power we hunger for so that we may be in control. "I wish to be great and to have my own way," and so I lust after power.

It is never completely clear to me, at the time, that I am being lustful. There is always something sneaky or slightly hidden about lust. The motive can look almost authentic. The purpose can be mistaken for something worthy. "I only want to own the company

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so I can do a better job, do more good, clean up the waste or injustice that now exists.” “I only want to possess the woman because we would both enjoy it so much. It would make *her* happy too.” Lust always tells its servants (and slaves) little lies like that.

Around 20 B.C., Roman writer Horace had a list of seven major sins. His word for lust was *amator*: to be in love with love, rather than with a person. What happens then to the people? The partners are “taken in” (duped) and think the love has something to do with them. When the truth comes out, it is devastating for everyone.

Well-known monk Evagrius of Pontus (345-399 A.D.) taught that women and bishops constituted the greatest temptations to monks (desert ascetics) and that both should be avoided as much as possible. Impurity was the problem. To mix women – sexual pleasure or thoughts of a family life – with the way of a monk was an impossible corruption of both; it could be one or the other, but the two together would ruin both. The bishop was just as dangerous because he was in the political structure of an organization. A monk had no business playing politics, seeking power, climbing the ladder of ecclesiastical authority. Evagrius taught that it was an impurity to mix that life with the one of an ascetic who prayed and meditated only to be in God’s presence – to see and know only the glory of Christ.

In our day, it’s easy to come across such comments and come away with very distorted views about the attitude of the ascetic saints toward conjugal love or family life, or about their attitude toward work and responsibility in the world.

One of Jesus’ most famous statements is: “*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*” (Matthew 5:27-28)

I used to raise, train, and show purebred collies. When Sandra, my pride and joy, was in heat, I always had plans for the puppies. Long and careful study went into deciding what dog should be the sire, what bloodlines would be the most outstanding. I went to great lengths to make sure no mongrel got to her to spoil all my plans. It would have seemed to me a great disaster, and it nearly happened a couple of times. Impurity was the issue – do not mix the bloodlines! That is where the ancient morals were coming from: should a man

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spend fifteen years raising a child not of his own blood? Lust is a power play; sex is only one of the many arenas it plays in.

To look at a woman lustfully is to want power over her, to dehumanize her. To treat a living person – a child of God – as if she were an object of desire to be used or possessed is deadly. That is what lust always does to whatever it touches: it reduces it to something less than it is intended and created to be. That is what makes it so deadly! And therein lies the terrible awakening. Anything that I want for myself too much is reduced, ruined, corrupted, spoiled. To want power or dominion over something or someone will lead toward death, especially my own. It will begin to kill my soul, because my soul is built to be in community, to share, to be creature. If I go for power over things or people, it will ruin them, if I get away with it. And it will kill me spiritually, whether I get away with it or not.

Is there any way in which *you* still seek power over anything or anyone, instead of seeking relatedness, understanding, sharing? Is there any way in which you still seek power over things, over the environment, over nature – instead of being in tune with things, a natural part of your environment, one with nature? Contemplating such things, we can each see clearly where we are struggling with lust in our lives. At those places, we are unhappy, we are not ourselves, we are not as in tune with God as we would like to be.

The corresponding virtue in this case is easy to identify. Love is the counterpart of lust. Be careful, however, not to jump it to the full-blown eternal verity. Here, we are merely talking on the level of a virtue – not about the eternal gift of God’s love. So reduce it down to the level of something you can choose, something you can decide to do: caring, affection – “I like him. I really like him.” That is quite powerful enough. We do not lust after people when we see and perceive them as true persons. They become too important in their own right to be mere objects of our lust for power. To care about your neighbor as much as you care about yourself is the great axiom by which we try to stay reminded.

Love cures lust. It is important to be clear, however, about what’s going on. That woman or man you look at with lust in your heart: Is it really lust? Over the years, I have known some people who have fallen in love with somebody yet it is not appropriate for the love to go anywhere. So they take a careless glance at Scripture and jump

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to the conclusion that they are in trouble because of lust, and it is a terrible sin. They do some of the things you are supposed to do to counteract lust, like care more, concentrate on the person's real value, focus on spiritual values. Of course, they only make it all worse and harder to deal with.

If it is not lust in the first place, it needs different treatment. If it *is* lust, love will cure it. But what if it is *already* love? Nothing will cure it, and only "distance," over time, will prevent disaster. A lot of severe harm comes from misplaced or misused virtue.

At the bottom of it, lust, like other sins, presumes that God is not enough. We must find some other power, some inappropriate or counterfeit power, so we can get in control, have things we want, move things around to our liking. This is not the way of faith or trust or humility; it is not the way of worshipping the God who is higher and greater than we are. So it leads to death because it separates us more and more from God, who is the source of life.

The Seven Deadly Sins are diseases of the soul. Without constant surveillance and strong measures, they tend to grow, like mold or mildew, take over, and ruin everything. The sins become more difficult with age. If they get a strong hold, they become more and more difficult to root out, and their results become more and more obvious to everyone except the host, who struggles under the familiar patterns of denial that plague so many diseases.

Just so with lust. It is hard to imagine what chance any of us could have without strong confidence in God – without the love and power of Jesus Christ to set us free.