

Lust, Temptation, and Integrity

God created sexual passion for us to enjoy. “Song of Songs” unveils this sexual passion as erotic desire for a partner’s body. This passion is so powerful that the poem repeated exclaims, “Do not arouse or awaken love until it is ready!”

This erotic love is good, unless it turns to lust, one of the seven “deadly sins.” And what is lust? A disorder of sexual desire. It’s not simply noticing an attractive person or the natural arousal we feel. Rather, lust is the craving to gratify our flesh by that of another. It looks upon others as sexual objects to use to satisfy our selfish desires. As such, lust dishonors others and ourselves. It defiles minds and destroys relationships. And lust degrades God’s gift of sex.

We do well to heed the warning of Proverbs 5. Those who are lured by lust may be ensnared, captured, and destroyed. Sound exaggerated? Consider its outcomes: dishonor, financial waste, and ruined reputation, to say nothing of degraded persons, broken marriages, and a partner’s wrath.

The Bible is open about sexual passion and honest about sexual failure. Consider David as Israel’s greatest king, a man after God’s own heart

and composer of inspiring psalms. Overtaken by his lust for Bathsheba, David abuses his power by raping her, resulting in her pregnancy and his violent cover-up. Their son, Solomon, like his father, came to ruin by lust. God’s wisest king and author of countless proverbs knew better, but he didn’t do better. Overcome by his lust, his heart turned from God, and this famously wise man fell into ruin, revealing the power of lust.

We don’t know what Paul struggled with, but he understood the tormenting battle between flesh and spirit when he wrote:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . .

. . . I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to . . . sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?
(Rom 7:15, 23–24).

It’s absurd what we trade for our cravings. Remember how Esau in his hunger bartered away his inheritance for Jacob’s bowl of stew (Gn 25:29–34)? Noting the power of lust to dominate

our will, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that lust “brings the whole body into hell, making us sell our heavenly birthright for a mess of pottage. . . . The gains of lust are trivial compared to the loss it brings—you forfeit your body eternally for the momentary pleasure of eye or hand.”

Consider the trade we make to satisfy the craving of lust with momentary pleasure. Like Esau trading his birthright for a bowl of stew, we exchange

- > Honor for violation
- > Freedom for bondage
- > Esteem for shame
- > Sexual intimacy for tainted sex
- > Reputation for disrepute

That’s the bankrupt bargain of lust. No one in their right mind would make such a trade. But when we’re in the clutches of lust, we’re not in our right mind. We’re set not on the Spirit but on the flesh in a world that’s saying, “Gratify your desires!” So we can be seduced by the lord of flesh and taken captive by lust.

How can we overcome this deadly sin and captivating vice? Certainly not by trying to overpower it alone. By ourselves, we are powerless against lust. If it can bring down a mighty warrior like David and a wise king like Solomon, it can conquer us.

Here’s good news! The same Spirit who empowered Jesus to resist temptation frees us from the grip of lust

and enables us to overcome temptation. And when we fall, God offers amazing, redeeming grace. When Jesus spoke to the woman caught in sexual sin, he said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more” (Jn 8:11 ESV).

The Spirit enables us to live a free life as we cooperate by doing our part. All this often happens in the context of the Christian community. As we walk with other brothers on our journey, as Jesus and his disciples walked together, there is strength in numbers.

A biblical writer points to the “virtue of the restraining power of self-control . . . over the desires.” Through self-control, “emotions of the appetites are restrained” and the “impulses of the body are bridled.” The same writer refers to Joseph prevailing against temptation: “It is for this reason . . . that the temperate Joseph is praised, because . . . he overcame sexual desire. For when he was young and in his prime for intercourse . . . he nullified the frenzy of the passions” and fled from temptation (4 Mc 1:30–2:3).

This involves more than what we do with our bodies. It also involves how we look upon others. Jesus says, “*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart*” (Mt 5:27–28).

This speaks to the majority of men. While most of us have not committed adultery, almost all of us have been guilty of looking upon others with

lust or have used pornography that objectifies others and degrades sexuality.

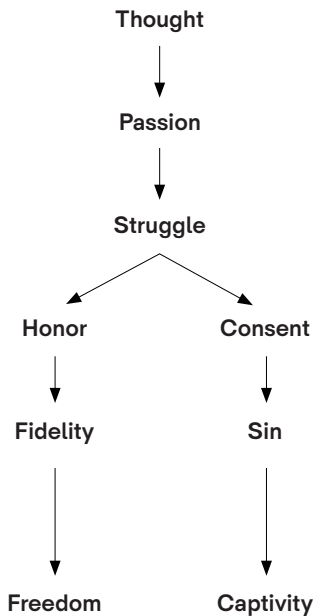
What man doesn't know the power of lust? A thought or an image can thicken into desire, which turns into raging lust hard to resist. As Thomas à Kempis notes in *The Imitation of Christ*, the best time to stop temptation is at the first thought before it turns to passion. After that, if one engages with lust, temptation usually wins.

The scriptures describe the

progression from temptation to sin to "death" (Jas 1:12–16), as illustrated in the story of Eve and Adam (Gn 3:1–21).

"Death" can include shame, fear, despair, estrangement, broken relationships, or shortened life. Early Christians who lived in the desert wrote out of their spiritual struggle in the wilderness. They further described the process of temptation as follows (see diagram below):

A Process of Temptation



A thought occurs. If entertained it continues; if not, it goes away. This is the easiest point to resist temptation.

Entertaining the thought thickens it into desire, which, if engaged, turns into a powerful passion.

The conflict ends with a decision to either honor God's love or consent to misleading lust.

We act. Here's the point of fidelity.

It's one thing to let a bird fly through your head, but another to let it make its nest there.

—Martin Luther

We have spiritual resources and practices to resist lust, overcome temptation, and maintain our integrity. These include:

- > *Watchfulness*—Paying attention to thoughts and desires to guard our hearts and minds (Jb 31:1; Mt 6:22-23; 1 Cor 10:12-13).
- > *Self-control*—Exercising self-control with our sexual passions (Prv 5:7-23; 4 Mc 1:30-2:44).
- > *Scripture*—Checking misleading thoughts with God’s word (Rom 6:12,19; 8:5-6). The quicker we counter misleading thoughts, the better.
- > *Prayer*—Appealing to the power of God’s Spirit (Gal 5:16-25; Jas 4:7). Prayer empowers us with wisdom, strength, and grace to prevail.
- > *Sharing*—Practice mutual vulnerability, sharing, and support with others (Gal 6:1-2; Heb 10:23-25). In our struggles, strength is found in numbers.

To live a sexual life that is truly free, loving, and whole, Jesus takes us to the heart of love by calling us to look upon others and ourselves for who we truly are—beloved children of God. We are not objects for lust but persons to love. To remember this, when we are tempted to gaze upon the bodies of others, we can refocus our attention on their eyes and see them for who they are.

Like Jesus when he was tempted, we are called to rely on God’s Word and Spirit in prayer. We also need others

with whom we can share our struggles and receive support. We need to admit our struggles to ourselves, to God, and to another person. We can break our silence and the grip of our secrets, for there is freeing power in sharing with trusted friends. With God and others, we can address our deeper hunger for connection that makes us vulnerable to lust, and instead find our wholeness in God’s Spirit.