

“The Seven Deadly Sins: Luxuria”

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

1 July 2007

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor
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For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

Prayer.

The early Christian Fathers
were being challenged.

On the one hand,
there were remaining a few
who believed and expected
Christ to return riding a cloud.
He would judge the living and the dead.
He would divide the world into heaven and
hell.

On the other hand,
there was a growing crowd
of those who believed that
Christ was not coming again,
after all,

why hadn't he returned here-to-fore?

They also believed
that Christianity could be reduced
to its least common denominator,
simply an intellectual exercise.
In other words,
if you are smart enough,
you can think your way into heaven,
and how we lead our life doesn't make a
difference.

Therefore, “eat, drink, and be merry
for tomorrow we die.”

This was a problem.
And it was growing.

What would the Church Fathers do?
What was needed was a way to teach

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the people that
 what we do does make a difference.
 It needed to be organized and systematic.
 It needed to be, at least, loosely connected
 to scripture.

It needed to be memorable.
 And it needed an aspect of
 fear.

So the Church (with a capital "C")
 created a two tiered system of sins.

Venial sins
 were relatively minor
 and could be remedied
 by any sacrament.

Cardinal sins
 or "mortal" sins,
 were those,
 when committed,
 destroyed the life of grace,
 and created the threat of eternal
 damnation
 unless either absolved
 through the sacrament of confession,
 or otherwise forgiven through perfect
 contrition
 on the part of the penitent.

These Cardinal sins
 were listed by Pope Gregory the Great
 in the 6th Century
 and later by Dante
 in his work "The Divine Comedy."
 Beginning in the early 14th century,
 the popularity of the seven deadly sins
 as a theme among European artists
 of the time eventually helped
 to ingrain them in many areas of Christian
 culture
 and Christian consciousness
 in general throughout the world.ⁱ

Which brings us to the first
 of the Seven Deadly Sins:
 Lust.

I think Jimmy Carter
 is one of the most honest men alive.
 He took a lot of heat
 for making the observation
 that he had committed the sin of Lust
 simply by gazing upon a woman.
 He denied any sexual intent or contact.
 But by his reading of the Word,
 simply to look, imagine, and consider
 sex outside of marriage
 is to be guilty of Lust.
 I agree with Jimmy Carter
 on this one.
 And I stand guilty right along with him.
 This, however, is not pastoral confessional
 hour.
 Truth be told, my guess would be
 that every other adolescent and adult
 present here today
 is standing in good company
 with former president Carter and me!

Obsessive or excessive thoughts and
 desires
 of a sexual nature
 is the way many have defined Lust.
 To obsess over something
 is to have your mind repeatedly
 returning to the one topic.
 The mind returns to that which brought
 pleasure.

Therefore, one means
 of breaking an obsessive thought
 is to intentionally turn it to something
 equally or more pleasurable.
 The key is the word
 "intentional."
 To be intentional
 implies that one is prepared
 at a moments notice to insert

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a substitute thought or thoughts when Lustful thought turn obsessive. "Perhaps it is time to go for a walk, play a round of tennis, or gather the family and go for some ice cream."

Another means of breaking an obsessive thought is to intentionally substitute it for something distasteful, or worse. For most of us the intentional substitution of a sibling – a sister or brother – for the object of our obsessive desire may be sufficient to protect and keep one at arms length, (or further).

This is often my strategy, and it has served me well for more than twenty years of marriage, parish ministry, and in the office.

If it isn't obsessive, consider excessive. "One man's excess might be considered another man's meager scraps, it is all so subjective, open to personal interpretation," we easily protest. So, what is excessive?

Dante's criterion was "excessive love of others," which therefore rendered love and devotion to God as secondary. What I like about Dante's criteria

is that it is uniquely adaptable to the person.

It is as simple as this:

Ask yourself, "how much time this past week have I spent rendering love and devotion to God?" and "how much time this past week have I spent thinking about sex?" and consider which is greater. (Ah! now you have insight into why one would choose a cloistered life! – just kidding). It makes this parish pastor wonder why church isn't packed every Sunday.

Lust and love are two different things.

Love builds community, it deepens positive and healthy relationships.

Love is the foundation of family, the glue that makes it strong.

Whereas Lust is the excessive desire for sexual release,

a means to an end, thus making the other person "objectified"

- nothing more than an object, an easily replaced object, I might add - in the process.

Ask yourself, could he be doing this with any other girl? or

could she be with any other guy?

If the answer is yes, then red flags should be popping everywhere.

Tell him or her, that they should be spending more time

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worshipping and loving God
and less time indulging excessive
thoughts about their sexual desires.

Objectified Lust
drives the pornography business.
It doesn't matter whose
image it is,
- it could be anyone's -
it simply facilitates
the obsessive and excesses
of Lust.
Lust destroys.
It breaks apart marriages and families.
Lust substitutes itself
- stealing the focus from God -
separating us from our perfect God,
placing us in need of redemption
and salvation
- salvation from hell itself,
our early Christian Fathers would tell us.

The apostle Paul's letter to the church
in Galatia
lists very completely
the details of Lust:
He cites adultery,
which is intercourse outside of marriage;
fornication,
which is intercourse without marriage;
uncleanness,
which is impure sex acts;
and
lasciviousness,
which means inordinate desire
for sex outside of marriage,
even if not acted upon.
Hello, Jimmy Carter.

Paul wasn't some innocent,
naïve, holier than thou
preacher, teacher or rabbi.

He was just as aware of what
was tearing apart and eating away
at the health and vitality of the faith
community
in Galatia
as we are aware of Ontario News on
Route 104
and Show World in Henrietta.
Whether it is internet porn
or lying with a prostitute,
Lust destroys!
Lust destroys
people, relationships, communities,
and ultimately,
Lust destroys our relationship with God.

The "fear card"
should not be understated.
It was so aptly played by the early Church.
This is fear: those unredeemed,
guilty of Lust,
would be banished to eternal hell and
damnation.
If this is what it takes to keep people
pure,
than, by golly,
I'm all for playing the fear card.
If it is fear of going to hell
or fear of not being ordained
or fear of being brought up on charges
and excommunicated from the Church
because one couldn't live up to
the statement in the Book of Discipline
"fidelity in marriage and celibacy in
singleness,"ⁱⁱ
then let me go on record
as supporting a little bit of healthy fear.

Weakness is the sign of an undisciplined
life.

Likewise, great strength can be found,

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- strength provided by the Holy Spirit
himself -
strength can be found
by reigning the self in
and taking control of the flesh.
Paul concludes this section of his letter
by saying,
“And those who belong to Christ Jesus
have crucified the flesh
with its passions and desires.
If we live by the Spirit,
let us also be guided by the Spirit.”
Amen.

ⁱ With thanks to Wikipedia.com

ⁱⁱ The Book of Discipline of the United
Methodist Church, 2004.