



Lust: Perverting Sex

Ryan Miller for October 30, 2010

Halloween is one of my favorite holidays. When I was younger it was all about the candy. You mean I can dress up and ring the doorbells of friends and neighbors and they will just give me candy if I say trick or treat? Best...idea...ever. I was so into it that I remember criticizing people that gave out bad candy. I decided when I was young that when I was an adult I would only give out the candy I would want to get – candy like snickers, kit kats, reese’s peanut butter cups and other awesomeness – never hard bubblegum, weird taffy chews or even worse, coupons or health food. When I got to high school I realized that I was perhaps too old to continue to trick or treating – and let me assure you , everyone in this room is too old for it – don’t be the creepy person trick or treating when you are older than 13. Then college came and I realized the joy of Halloween parties. In college people really knew how to do the holiday right. A serious commitment to costumes and fun made them really great – kind of like the party last night.

Halloween is significant to me for another reason – the first time I asked my wife Liz to do something with me was for Halloween in 2001. I went as the comic book and movie character the Crow. How did Liz come into the picture? I needed to paint my face and she was the only art major I knew – and she was pretty awesome and hot as well, so I asked for her help. Since then we have often been pretty serious about Halloween. The following year I asked Liz to marry me on Halloween – we went dressed as Aragorn and Arwen from the Lord of the Rings – yes we are dorks. When I gave her the Evenstar pendant she is wearing in the pictures there was an engagement ring on it. Halloween has a special place in my heart because of these memories.

Now, today more than ever, Halloween has become known not just for candy and parties and costumes but also for specific types of costumes – the types of costumes that many women wear that excite all the boys who see them. You know – the slutty nurse, or slutty schoolgirl or as *How I Met Your Mother* referenced, the slutty pumpkin. Halloween has come to be associated with lust in many people’s minds. What will they be wearing, how revealing will it be and is there a way I can get someone out of that costume and into bed?

Now lust isn’t always this blatant in our lives and if we are honest, the struggle that each of us has with it makes us feel like it’s not that big a deal. All of us lust from time to time, it is part of being human – it can’t be that bad or really affect others can it? The problem is, we think that lust is just a minor nuisance, but it is engaging in small ways like looking at everyone’s Halloween pictures and the different costumes with an eye for skin that can take us down a dangerous road.

Let me explain what I mean. I had a friend in college, a good friend. He became a Christian and was a great musician – he even played on my band’s first studio album. After graduation he went on to work at a church in Kansas. Then a few years after moving to Tucson I received a forward from one of my friends about this fellow. I generally hate forwards so I was hesitant to look at it but after reading the subject line I opened it up. I was sitting at Espresso Art Coffeeshop where we use to meet for worship and inside the email was an article about someone who had been arrested in a police sting for soliciting sex from an underage girl online. Throughout the article it kept using my friend’s name. By the end of the email I was sure it was just a sick joke. But then came the mug shot. And it was my friend, who later went to jail for his crime.

I remember being shocked because my friend was married to a beautiful woman and he was doing his best to follow Jesus. He was on staff at a church for crying out loud! Wasn’t he in relationships with other men who were committed to helping him avoid this sort of sin and nurture the type of relationship with his wife and with God that would make this sort of occurrence impossible? How could this have happened? I could never do it, could I?

My friend’s decision isn’t something that just happens. You don’t wake up one day and decide – I’m going to solicit an underage girl for sex online today. Or I’m going to have an affair or I’m going to be so consumed with pornography that it keeps me from living a healthy life. This is never the problem. We wouldn’t make that decision unless we had made a string of bad decisions before it. So it was, that one day, after years of viewing thousands of pictures, after actively giving control of his body and his mind to lust over and over again, he took another small step and made a decision that destroyed his life. And it can happen to anyone. All of us in big and small ways struggle with lust and if left unchecked we are in serious danger.

God makes it very clear that sex is designed to be between a man and a woman who are united by God in a marriage relationship. A relationship marked by self-sacrifice, commitment and love no

matter what. Anything outside of this design, even if it's just a fantasy can impact our relationships, our minds, our bodies and our souls.

We are surrounded by out-of-control sexuality. The value that our culture and many people place on sexual pleasure leads people to squander their money, destroy their families and even give up on life itself. When our beautiful, God-given desire for sex is distorted and twisted and begins to demand whatever it wants without commitment or care we fall under the power of lust: one of the most pervasive of the seven deadly sins in our culture today.

Lust is giving our minds and body over to the control of our basest cravings. Everyone who struggles with it knows that there is something wrong about viewing others as objects for your own pleasure and gratification so they hide their habits from those they care about the most. This shame often reveals not only small problems in our lives but rather serious brokenness.

Imagine you visit an alternate reality where throngs of people flock to see a striptease. As you join the crowd and turn your attention to the stage you are startled because instead of a woman, a small covered platter is brought out and with wide eyes and a disturbing smile someone slowly removes the lid revealing a...steaming...hamburger. You of course may realize you are slightly hungry but more than anything else this seems like a joke. Unfortunately, you are the only one who thinks this. All around you people are howling. Some snicker, whispering and elbowing their friends. Some just sit in their seats quivering. If such a reality existed you would think it not only weird but deeply disturbed. Something in the audience has gone wrong. Everyone feels hunger, enjoying good food is natural, but this sort of out of control desire reveals that there is something undeniably wrong with the audience. This is what has happened to our country, our culture and too many of us. Our good and natural desire for relationship and intimacy and sex has become something that controls us and destroys our relationships with God and each other.

How pervasive is this issue? Consider the most obvious evidence of lust in our culture: the pornography industry.

“In 2004, ComScore, an internet tracking company, found that more than seventy percent of men ages 18-34 visit one or more pornographic website in a typical month. Legal pornography is now estimated to be a twelve billion dollar industry in America...that's more that the combined revenues of ABC, CBS, and NBC. And more than the revenue of all professional baseball, football, and basketball teams put together.”

Consider it on a per-second basis. According to “Top Ten Internet Pornography Statistics” by Jerry Ropelato featured on Internet-Feature-Review.com: Every second \$3075.64 are being spent on porn, 28,258 people are viewing porn online, and 372 people are typing adult search terms into search engines. Every 39 minutes a new pornographic video is made in the United States. Our world has become pornified and the effects on men and women and how they relate to each other are

pervasive. Often times with statistics the problems are inflated but with regards to pornography I think it's far too conservative – I mean who wants to own up to their problem with pornography on a survey?

There is little doubt that our culture and our lives have been touched by pornography as well as the root of the issue: lust. If people weren't willing to consume and pay for pornography the industry would dwindle, but our nation has endorsed lust with our minds, hearts and dollars.

The Bible objects to lust not because it produces ecstasy but because the ecstasy produced is a third-rate substitute for something real. Instead of the joy and fulfillment of loving and being loved, knowing and being known in the safety and commitment of marriage, lust offers us a wasteland of broken relationships and fleeting pleasures instead. We can and must find freedom from this deadly sin if we hope to live in relational and spiritual intimacy with God, each other and ourselves. To confront this sin and begin to find freedom from it we need to take a fresh look at what the Bible has to say about it.

To understand what the Bible has to say about sex we need to start at the beginning. Genesis begins with God creating earth and then creating people "in his own image." The writer of Genesis makes it clear that in all of creation there is something different about humans. In some distinct, intentional way, something of God has been placed in them. We reflect what God is like and who God is. A divine spark resides in every single human being. Everybody, everywhere: bearers of the divine image.

Genesis goes on to tell us that when God was done creating us he called us good. Our bodies and our very beings are good. We are clearly made with sexual organs and it is exactly how we were intended to be. Our bodies are good and our sexuality is also good. God specifically indicates our sexual role when he tells Adam and Eve to "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it." The creation narrative ends with a verse which is also blatantly sexual: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh."

What is so important about this is that we are made to have sex. It wasn't an accident, and our bodies and sexuality were formed this way before God's creation was bent by humanities' selfishness. Our bodies may decay and our sexuality may be out of whack today, but before sin entered the world, in God's original perfect creation, sex was a part of it. We shouldn't be ashamed of sexual desire – it is exactly how we were designed to be. We need to embrace the truth that we are sexual beings and it is right and good that we are.

We are all bearers of the image of God and we are all sexual. This is why the physical objectification that goes on today is so destructive. Websites like Hot or Not.com or conversations rating the physical attributes of members of the opposite sex is entertainment for many, but the problem is the "that" is actually a "she" or a "he." A person. With a name, a history, with feelings. Made in the image of God. It can seem harmless until you are the person being objectified. Then it hurts. It's degrading and belittling and it does something to a person's soul.

Lust, objectification and pornography have profound impacts on both men and women. For women it often results in broken trust, significant personal rejection and profound shame in themselves and about their physical appearance. Women feel an intense pressure to accommodate pornography's perverse messages, and feel overwhelmed and powerless to do anything about it. Finally, wives often blame themselves for their husband's sexual disinterest that is produced because of lust and pornography use.

The impact on men is different. Our pornified culture programs them to dominate, misuse, and disdain women. Men become emotionally detached and shut down. Husbands become dissatisfied with their wives physical features and sexual performance, and become increasingly insensitive, unromantic and aggressive when engaging in sex. It leads to a distorted sense of female sexuality, diminished libido, and even a struggle with physical and emotional impotence.

For these and other reasons Jesus had serious words to say about what happens when a woman, a bearer of the divine spark, becomes a "that." In the book of Matthew, Jesus teaches that "anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Matt. 5:28) He connects our eyes and our intentions and our thoughts with the state of our hearts. He makes an action like lust that seems private and individual, into adultery, which is something relational that affects many people.

Jesus then takes it farther. He says,

"If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away." (Matt. 5:29a)

This statement seems pretty crazy not to mention violent. If we were to take that command literally I doubt many of us would still be able to see. I don't think Jesus is saying we should all literally gouge out our eyes rather I believe that there is a deeper truth here. Jesus explains this teaching by saying

"It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell." (Matt. 5:29b)

We just went from lust, which is incredibly common, to having your body thrown into hell in just two sentences? That seems like a bit of a stretch. What's Jesus talking about here? To understand his logic we have to understand the first-century Jewish concept of heaven and hell. To the Jewish mind, heaven is not a fixed, unchanging geographical location somewhere other than this world. It's not some separate spiritual realm where angels play harps and everyone is happy. Heaven is the realm where things are as God intends them to be. It is the place where things are under the rule and reign of God. And that place can be anywhere, anytime, with anybody.

It's written in the Psalms that *"the highest heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth he has given to humankind."* (Ps. 115:16 TNIV)

So there is this realm, heaven, where things are as God wants them, under the rule and reign of God. But the earth is different. “The earth he has given to humankind” which means we can do whatever we want. We can choose to live under the rule and reign of God, or we can choose to rebel against God and live some other way.

Logically, if there’s a realm where things are as God wants them to be, then there must be a realm where things are not as God wants them to be. Where things aren’t according to God’s will. Where people aren’t treated as fully human. It’s called hell.

And that’s Jesus’ point with the “gouge out your eye” teaching. His point isn’t that you should mutilate your body if you find yourself lusting after someone. His point is that something serious – sometimes hellish – happens when people are treated as objects, and we should resist it at all costs. His point is that our out-of-control lust is not only hellish but is a danger to our souls. In that situation removing the body part that is infected so that the soul can live on in health makes perfect sense. It’s like amputating a foot that has gangrene before it spreads to kill you.

Lust is destroying people around us and it is eating away at our souls. It utterly divorces sex from relationship and perverts God’s good and beautiful gift into something that can keep us in bondage and lead us to places we never wanted to go – places of a hellish existence instead of a heavenly one.

Our problem is we are far too easily pleased. Let me explain what I mean: when I was growing up I loved to eat at restaurants. Every time my family would go to dinner someone different would get to choose where we were going to eat. My mother always wanted to go somewhere nice – but my brother and I always wanted to go to McDonalds. We couldn’t resist the pull of the golden arches. And we were completely happy. McDonalds was enough for us. But as I got older I realized that McDonald’s is really at the bottom rung of good food. Instead of great Chinese or a fancy dinner I was satisfied with McDonalds. I was far too easily pleased. If I had to choose between a steak and a hamburger or hot dog I would choose the later. I was a fool. There is so much more than hot dogs in life. There is so much more than pornography and masturbation and casual sex – there is a true, beautiful reality that you can enjoy. Choose the life and love and joy that can be found in God’s design for sex, and nowhere else.

C.S. Lewis says it this way in *The Great Divorce*:

“Lust is a poor, weak, whimpering, whispering thing compared with that richness and energy of desire which will arise when lust has been killed.”

When lust is driven out and we embrace our true, God-given sexuality we will discover that our desires are not too great but rather too weak. We have been settling for fleeting, temporary pleasure when we could have the joy and intimacy and safety of sex as God designed it, bonding a husband

and wife together in a way like nothing else in life. We are settling for McDonalds when we could have a four course meal.

I know this is a huge struggle for people. I know because it's a struggle for me. I was first exposed to sexualized female nudity at my friend Mike's house. His dad had a stash of magazines that Mike had located and he showed them to me once when I was in middle school. From there Mike's house became the place that I saw those sorts of things. We would watch the premium channels that were only sort of blacked out hoping to see glimpses of sex or nudity. I distinctly remember watching Basic Instinct this way. Now you would think that my problems in this area would have gone on a downward spiral at this point. Not true. Actually I really was pretty well off in this area in high school. The problem for me was, eventually curiosity killed the cat. In college I finally understood what masturbation was and I discovered pornography for the first time as an adult. It was not a persistent issue for me in college but it did rear its ugly head from time to time. For some reason I believed that after I was married that this issue would just disappear, but let me tell you, that is not true. The problem was I never took significant steps to halt my exposure to it and seek God's healing in this area. And so at times when I would feel lonely, or rejected in my relationship or frustrated with a number of things I would find myself falling into lust again. Some of the time it wasn't even lust that was the problem – sometimes it was sloth: it was not pursuing Liz by sacrificing for her, loving her in creative ways and giving her my best energy. Instead I would find other ways to meet my needs. There is little so damaging to a relationship and to intimacy than personal selfishness and sexual sin found in both sloth and lust.

What is good is that we are not without hope. We can find freedom from this sin. What is brought to the light can be redeemed – ultimately, fantastically redeemed. If it isn't brought to the light, it creates barriers and separation in relationships and a place where darkness festers. We must confess, receive forgiveness and work towards the freedom that God offers us.

I know that most churches offer little help. They say things like read your Bible more, pray consistently, and come to church next week – all standard answers when you don't know what to say. It's not that this won't be helpful – it will be, but it's not very practical. Any step toward freedom starts with a refocus on God. Jesus said that the center of following him was in loving God and loving others. If we live with this focus, lust and pornography and masturbation and sex outside of marriage will have no place in our lives.

Remember when I related Jesus words about lust earlier? He said “anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” In this verse he connects our eyes and our thoughts with the state of our hearts. Freedom starts with a clear plan and the truth is we need to starve this lust addiction. This is where we can begin to take practical steps to change. I'm going to talk about this in some stereotypical ways concerning the differences between men and women on this issue. I hope that you can take what will be helpful and not get hung up if you don't fit exactly

what I say. Each of us needs to build three perimeters of defense in our lives – our eyes, our minds and our hearts.

Men primarily receive sexual gratification through the eyes. It doesn't have to be anything fancy, a picture, an attractive girl, really a number of things. This is why it is so vital for men to create a covenant with their eyes just like Job did. In Job 31:1 Job declares: I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl. In Matt 6:22-23 Jesus said: "The eye is the light of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are evil, your whole body will be full of darkness. And if the only light you have is really darkness, then you have the worst darkness." Often when men find themselves struggling with lust if they think back through the day there are many images or tv shows or women that they looked at in a way that began to trigger their lust. If you can begin to control your eyes and bounce away from any visual triggers that can stimulate you sexually, you can begin to get a handle on your lust issue. You cannot keep from seeing certain things – like attractive women - but how you look at them and how long you do so is in your control. Women struggle to understand this because their main sexual ignitions or triggers are tied to touch and relationship, but trust me when I say that for men controlling their eyes is the first step to victory over lust.

The second area you need to build defenses around is your mind. Even if we are controlling our eyes, which is the gateway to lust for men, our minds can still trip us up. In some ways our brains are like hard drives that can store countless images and scenes that we can access far too easily. We need to learn to "take captive every thought" as 2 Corinthians 10:5 tells us to. As we learn to control our thoughts, and take them captive we need to redirect those thoughts. Philippians 4:8 tells us: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things." There is much to occupy our minds if we are focused on loving God and others. If we don't corral the first thought capture the second one. The goal is to stop the cycle of lust before it feels inevitable that you will fall to sexual sin. Your sin is not inevitable in this area, you can find freedom with discipline, accountability and God's help.

1 Cor 10:13 "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."

Ultimately we can change the very patterns of our thoughts and break the stranglehold lust has on us. Our minds truly can be renewed as Romans teaches: Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:2)

Finally, we must guard our hearts. Proverbs 12:3 encourages us in this area: "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." We need to make sure that our spouse or our

future spouse is the only person of the opposite sex we let into our hearts. If you are married focus your time and energy on honoring and cherishing your wife. Focus on building that relationship and release anyone else who has made it into your heart so that past relationships or new friendships won't lead you away from your spouse and the life that God has called you to. For singles, honor and cherish every date just as you hope a guy or girl is doing with your future spouse. Build healthy relationships with friends and members of the opposite sex and meet your relational and emotional needs there until the time when you marry.

This strategy is especially effective with men who are visually stimulated. For women it can often look a little different and really it works in almost the exact opposite way. Women's sexuality is relational. For women finding freedom from lust starts with your heart.

Women absolutely must guard their hearts as Proverbs says. It is your desires for relationships and relational and emotional connections that can lead you to lust and eventually to serious sexual sin.

Shannon Ethridge describes this struggle in her book *Every Woman's Battle*:

"The problem with most of our plans to remain sexually pure or faithful within marriage is that they only include physical boundaries. Rarely do we understand the emotional progression of relationships before it's too late and we've been sucked into an affair of the heart. Because a woman can jeopardize her emotional integrity long before her body becomes vulnerable to temptation, I encourage women to focus on keeping their emotions in check. When we guard our hearts and keep them pure and faithful, we will protect our bodies as well."

When women engage in emotional affairs, mental fantasies, and unhealthy comparisons, they are crossing the line of sexual integrity and undermining God's plan to grant ultimate sexual fulfillment with your current or future husbands. Married women must foster romance in their marriages, and continually seek deeper emotional and relational intimacy with her husband. They also must have significant boundaries concerning relationships with men other than their husband. Significant conversation forges bonds and develops intimacy, so be very carefully about the depth and intimacy of the conversations you have with other men. If you have problems or struggles take them to God and your husband, not to someone else. If you think that someone who is not your husband is making his way into your heart Flee! Ask forgiveness, pray for God's protection, avoid unnecessary contact with the person, and seek a trusted friend or counselor to keep you accountable. You need to set healthy parameters, guard your associations with men, guard your eyes from flirtation and suggestive talk and even guard your time and money. If you aren't proactive you may find someone making their way into your heart that has no business being there.

When someone enters your heart they often occupy your mind. Just like the men, learn to take your thoughts captive. When you think or fantasize about something it is just like rehearsing a scene and it weakens your defenses. You need to resist the thoughts, redirect the thoughts and renew your thoughts constantly to overcome lust.

After the heart and mind, lust makes its way to your eyes. Once someone is in your heart and you begin thinking of them, when you see it's hard not to lust. You need to focus on stopping the problem before it reaches this point but avoiding contact if at all possible is vital here. Quit your job or move if you have to – your integrity, your marriage, your heart is more important than any job or home.

All of us who want to find freedom from lust need to be in confessional accountability relationships.

Proverbs 28:13 tells us *“He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion”* (NASB).

We need to be people who are open and transparent about our problems and also people who offer grace and amnesty to others who need help. Without this forgiveness being available why would anyone ever confess and come clean? We must create a culture where people can find healing and not condemnation. While it's hard to share this aspect of our lives we need to get better at it. We need to walk along side each other as we struggle to live in rhythm with God's call on our lives sexually. We need to talk about sex openly: about its beauty and purposes as well as its challenges and struggles. We need to invite each other into our lives so we can grow beyond ourselves. We need to invite God into our lives through prayer as we live out this faith and reality. We also need to remember that sexual sin is not an unforgivable sin. If we respond with judgment and ostracism when someone shares their challenges with us we will never foster the type of grace-filled community that must exist to address sexuality in a healthy way. If we are going to pick up the pieces of a broken sexuality and correct our past missteps, we need to remember that Jesus consistently extended grace and forgiveness to those caught in sexual sin. His harshest words were reserved for people who were prideful, judgmental and religiously superior, not for those in sexual sin. We need to follow his example in this area.

I told you earlier about my friend who lived a life of lust and ended up spending years behind bars. This is an extreme example but lust can damage us and our relationships significantly before we reach this point. What is incredible is that the story didn't end with my friend in jail. With God's help, he has found freedom from his lust, he is out of jail, has reconciled with his wife and is rebuilding his life. We can find freedom from lust just like he did.

All of us have desires that we will never be free of. They were placed in us by God for good, but if we aren't careful they can control us and destroy us. We need to fulfill our desires in ways that can truly satisfy. The happiest people in the world are not those who give in to lust or have sex with anyone they want. The happiest people are those who have connected with their purpose in God and grow in love for him and others more every day. The happiness of Hugh Hefner is pathetic and miserable compared to that of Mother Teresa or Desmond Tutu. Choosing freedom from lust is hard and will

take all our commitment, as well as help from God and good friends, but in the end there is only one path to true joy and lust is not a part of it.

May we be people who choose enduring love over passing pleasure.

May we choose freedom over bondage, Heaven over Hell, and a life for God and others over the illusions that lust offer.

Let's pray.