# Lust and Purity

**by Dan Allender**

The church pianist arched her back and stretched her arms in preparation for the opening hymn. The man in front of me didn't miss one movement. His wife, painfully aware of the object of his gaze, jabbed him in the side; he shot back angrily, "I wasn't looking at anything." His remark seemed well rehearsed, perhaps from countless other occasions of being caught stealing looks at attractive women. The couple's hurt and anger betrayed the endless cycle of accusation, defense, guilt, effort, helplessness, and failure so often associated with struggles of lust.

Lust is a battle for us all. Christians – both men and women – have struggled with it for generations. Many have measured their or others' spirituality on the basis of their freedom from lust. Yet for all the interest focused on lust it would seem that we ought to be far more clear about the problem and its solution. What exactly is lust, why is it so hard to change, and how can we deal with its power to shape our lives?

**The Color of Lust**

Most people have come to equate lust with sexual desire. In many cases in Scripture, lust does refer to illicit sexual desire (1 Pet. 4:3). Consequently, if we are not struggling with illicit sexual thoughts or behavior, we assume we are free from lust. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The word in the New Testament that is translated "lust" means strong desire. The word can be used to describe a legitimate, godly desire. Jesus said to His disciples: "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer" (Luke 22:15 ). Elsewhere Paul said he strongly desired to depart this life to be with the Lord (Phil. 1:23 ), and yet he also strongly desired to be with his friends ( 1 Thess. 2:17 ). Strong, passionate, eager desire or lust is not inconsistent with God's purpose for our lives.

On the other hand we know from the Bible and from experience that a strong desire, or lust, can be immoral and destructive. I spoke to a thirty-five-year-old man, "Craig", who had fought an obsession with pornography since he was eight years old. He was alternately victorious and then overwhelmed by his lustful desires. His occasional lapses endangered his ministry and threatened his relationship with his family.

But this man's battle with lust was not confined solely to sexual pictures and mental images. In fact, his lust manifested itself in workaholism, extreme absorption in hobbies and reading, and an obsessive desire to please others. To focus too narrowly on his sexual lust would have caused us to lose the bigger picture of his battle with addictive desires.

"Diana" was struggling with the desire to have a fifth child. Every time she saw a newborn baby, she ruminated and obsessed about how to convince her husband. She lusted after being pregnant. Her battle was not sexual, but I would suggest she had just as great a problem with lust as the man who struggled with pornography.

**When Desire Goes Awry**

When does lust become destructive? Destructive lust is any consuming desire that is either out of bounds or out of balance.

An *out-of-bounds* lust is a desire for any person or object or idea that is inconsistent with God's expressed desire for our life. To feel sexual desire for our spouse is appropriate; to covet our neighbor's wife is an illegitimate desire.

An *out-of-balance* lust is any legitimate desire that blocks our ability to serve God and others. For example, a student who is so consumed by getting good grades (a legitimate desire) that he is unable to spend time pursuing God is consumed by an out-of-balance lust. Likewise, a neighbor who can't say no to her friend's desire to go to a movie is equally imbalanced in her lust for acceptance.

Defined in this way, no one is free from the battle with lust. Why do we battle so often with its forces? And why do those battles yield so little fruit and victory? In other words, why is lust so hard to change?

**The Power of Lust**
The answer to those questions requires a more thoughtful analysis of the design and function of lust. God made us with desire – desire for intimate relationship with Him and for meaningful service in His world. The Fall perverted those desires. The quest for intimacy was replaced by a desire for its quickest counterfeit: illicit sexual pleasure. Our God-given desire for meaningful service was twisted to a lust for power over others. The longing for impact became a lust for control.

These counterfeits appeal to us because they seek to replace God and His high standards with something that is familiar and undemanding. Paul says fallen man did not worship God but replaced Him with the creature (Ro. 1:18 -23). The creature does not require repentance or gratitude. The creature does not demand brokenness or service. Creature worship only requires denying the true emptiness inside and hiding the shame that arises in turning our back on God and others.

Why is that form of lust so difficult to overcome? Because it is the best alternative to satisfying our empty hearts without dependently bowing our knee before God. Changing it not only requires giving up something that has worked, to some degree, to fill our empty hearts, but it also necessitates embracing a God who invites us to experience what we deeply despise – brokenness, poverty, weakness, and dependency. In the face of a walk through the valley of the shadow of death, an addiction to pornography, a fifth child, or saying no to a friend seems like a lark in the park.

Even if the lust is destructive and life threatening it may be preferable to a God who calls us to love those who harm us and serve those who in fact are below us. True worship is too costly; creature worship is at first, at least less demanding.

**Two Faulty Strategies**
What is required to deal with our battle with lust? Let me first take a look at two contemporary Christian routes for dealing with lust that at times make the problem worse. These two routes – self-denial and self-enhancement—offer some help, but often lead to even greater struggles with lust and addiction. Craig eventually followed both of these paths.

As a new Christian, Craig viewed the struggle with lust as an overwhelming desire for sexual pleasure or relief. He saw the real enemy as sexual thoughts and feelings and the cure as merely choosing the right procedure for conquering his lust. The victory came when he felt sufficiently guilty over the thoughts, avoided the opportunities for lust, and chose to discipline his wandering mind.

Sadly, the fruit of this view is often self-hatred, shame, and contempt which lead to increased sexual struggles. After decades of failure many with this view either conclude they are oppressed by demons or doubt their salvation.

Another approach to lust is found in an adaptation of the Alcoholics Anonymous Twelve Step recovery process. This approach sees lust as a symptom of deeper hurt. The cure is to admit that everyone is addicted. Once denial is removed then the shame of feeling deficient can be eliminated and the real roots of the problem – loneliness, insecurity, and past trauma – can be healed and the addiction controlled.

While the first approach to dealing with lust often encourages self-hatred and denial, the second approach may increase self-absorption. When Craig adopted this approach he gained more control of his sexual lusts. But he then struggled with new, equally strong addictions. He became a groupaholic, attending several recovery-type groups per week.

He was also a selfaholic. He became absorbed with making sure no one violated his personal desires. He began sharing his feelings whenever he wanted to, no matter how inappropriate it was. He lost a great deal of sensitivity and care for others.

Craig acknowledged that he had turned from a man who lacked a self to one who put self above others and ultimately above the God who called him to serve. Unfortunately, he never looked at the deeper structure of sin involved in his lust. In part his efforts to control his lust were God-honoring; on the other hand he never faced the fact that his lust was far more than merely a struggle with sexual thoughts.

**Why Discipline Isn't Enough**
Lust is a failure to exercise the will toward righteousness. People who battle any form of lust must work at strengthening their wills. But it is never enough merely to address one's lack of discipline. It is crucial to view lust as a product of hatred: hatred of our loneliness and our circumstances and hatred of the God who requires us to love in spite of our pain. Lustful addictions are the vehicle to flee from the ache and use our helplessness as an excuse not to love others and God.

What is required for destructive lust to be transformed into passionate, lively, and loving desire for God and others? I don't believe there are pat answers or even easily- articulated steps that relieve our battle with the flesh. The ultimate cure is Heaven; until then, all change and certainly all steps are mere approximations of what is involved in knowing God and being transformed by His presence. Yet I can offer a few tentative thoughts to help begin the process of change.

**1. Face the problem.**
Addictive lust feeds on the darkness of denial. "I'm not an alcoholic. I just drink to sooth my nerves – or to feel more relaxed." "I may masturbate a lot, but doesn't everyone at one time or another?" "I know I work too late, but it's only until I get more settled in my job." Deception is the ally of lust in that it allows us to serve both mammon and God and make it look as if all is well.

For example, Diana viewed her desire for a fifth child as natural and reasonable. Beneath the surface, however, her motives were less than pure. Another baby would keep her from facing the eventual loss of her youthfulness and worth are the mother of young children. And as a busy mother, she would not need to face the growing distance in her relationship with her husband. Her rage at his unwillingness to have another child masked the loneliness she felt in their marriage. Every lustful obsession serves the desire to be satisfied apart from God. If change is to occur, denial must be lifted and the ugly parts of our soul exposed.

**2.Wrestle with your heart as well as your behavior.**
Without question, lust will not be changed without a willingness to discipline the will. I must be willing to fight, scratch, and claw toward holiness (1 Pet. 4:1-3). If I can't say no to the temptation to eat, then I ought to avoid situations where my lust will be given room to flourish. I must make the right choices.

But choice is not enough. More is required than merely the effort to avoid lust and focus on godly desire. We must repent of the deeper issues that are feeding our lust. But one cannot deeply repent of what is unknown. We need to pray that God will reveal the secret things of our hearts (Psalm 18:9). Some of the subtle categories of the heart to be considered when dealing with a tenacious lust problem are these:

*What is the context for my struggles with lust?* Many find that lust is more severe after a stressful event, such as a failure or success. It is very important to keep a journal that records the experience of lust, the context, and the battle to deal with both the heart and obedience.

*What significant current or past wounds am I ignoring in my struggles with lust?* Many times a lust problem is easier to bear than a deep wound that seems impossible to erase. For example, Craig found that he often gave in to sexual fantasies after phone conversations with his critical and demanding father. His sexual addiction masked the lonely wounds and anger related to his parent.

*What do I feel unable to do or be because of my struggle with lust?* Sadly, a struggle with lust may subtly serve as an excuse for choices that may seem more frightening. Craig refused to honor his father by talking about their relationship. He quietly endured his father's reproach rather than praying and agonizing over what God might have him do to deepen his love for his father.

Repentance in the ongoing process of sanctification is not a once-for-all event. As we face our denial and repent of our rebellion against God, then we will find greater insight and increased sorrow over sin.

**3. Learn to love.**
Honesty and repentance are crucial to change. The ultimate antidote to lust, however, is love. It is very, very difficult to destructively lust after someone you love. It is very hard to lust after something that does damage to someone you love. Lust is a consuming and absorbing possession of someone in order to dull our own pain rather than a delighting in and enhancing of another.

An engaged couple may look at one another with enormous passion and keen anticipation of their merger as one flesh, but if love prevails, then they would refuse to do anything that would mar their individual or corporate beauty. In the same way, a man and woman who work together may enjoy one another's physical or personal beauty, but if love prevails, then each will long to increase one another's beauty rather than stain it by the violation of destructive lust.

It is tragic that many men attempt to deal with lust by avoiding rich, intimate, and honorable relationships with women. They believe that distance insures safety; in fact, reserve only seems to increase private fantasies. The only real safety net is love.

In Phil. 4:8 Paul tells us to meditate on whatever is true, noble, right, pure, and lovely. Somehow being caught up in that which is lovely is incompatible with the ugliness of destructive lust. Ultimately, the fairest and most lovely of all meditations is Jesus Christ .

Paul says that deception and enslavement to all kinds of passions begin to melt in the light of the kindness and love of God (Titus 3:3-4). The brutal power of lust will not succumb to any force of the human will unless the heart is captured by the glory and tenderness of the gospel. As the good news of freedom from God's wrath increases our wonder, laughter, and passion to live, then the dark desire to possess, to consume, and to destroy will have less power in our lives. The joy of being forgiven, not only of behavior but also of the sin deep in our hearts, will increase our desire to love (Luke 7:47 ). And an increase in a desire to love will deepen our desire to see beauty enhanced in everyone whom we have the pleasure and privilege to encounter.

**Lusting for Godliness**

Unfortunately, we will battle with lust for the remainder of our lives. But with hearts redeemed by the gospel, we will be freer to turn toward the path of beauty rather than pursue the track of hatred.

The passion of the gospel will eventually overrule and defeat the destructive lust of consumption. The pursuit of holiness will become far more than a desire to do right but a desire, or a "lust", for the character and beauty of God. In that sense, the gospel frees us to lust after what our hearts are made for, godliness, rather than after that which leads to decay, death, and despair. Godly lust leads to life. In that sense, go and lust well.