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WINNING THE WAR AGAINST LUST

by

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I want to answer a very practical question for Christians living in this sex-saturated society: *How can we win the war against lust and the overt sexual sin which results from lust?* We're bombarded daily with sensuality. You can't watch TV, read a news magazine or drive past billboards without being confronted with blatantly sexual pictures and messages. We all know that as Christians, we are to avoid sexual immorality. The tough question is, How? Being a man, I'm writing as a man to men, although what I say has much application to women as well.

For years I fought a losing battle against lust. It wouldn't be profitable for me to go into detail describing my defeats. But so that you know that I've been there, I will say that ever since my early teens, I have been a connoisseur of fine women. Long before the movie, "10," came out, I had a habit of automatically checking out a woman's anatomy and scoring her various features. For a number of years, there were very few "Playmates of the Month" whom I had not scrutinized. I was a Christian, even a "committed" Christian and seminary student during some of that time, involved in serving the Lord. But I was defeated by lust.

I still lose an occasional skirmish. But by God's grace, for many years now, I've been winning the war. I want to tell you how. Several things have helped me move from defeat to consistent victory.

SCARED INTO HOLINESS

I got scared straight. I knew I should be holy. Years ago I yielded my life to the Lord in accordance with Romans 12:1-2. But that didn't make much difference in my battle against lust. Finally I came to a point where the Lord backed me into the corner and asked pointedly, "Do you want to be a man of God or do you want to keep messing around with this sin?" Gulp! I had to make a choice to be holy.

Theoretically, that decision is easy. But in reality, it's a fierce struggle, because, frankly, I enjoy looking at sexy women. Hormones start pumping when I feast my eyes on one of those gorgeous creatures. Besides, it's a pastime I can indulge in secretly. It's all in my head.

God used two things to show me where unchecked lust can lead, which scared me into dealing with my lust habit.

First, I was scared by the devastation wreaked in the life of a friend who was ruined by sexual sin. When I graduated from seminary, I checked out several ministry situations. One opportunity involved working as an associate with a man I'll call Bob who is about eight years older than I. He had founded a thriving church in Southern California and needed help with the growing demands. I was attracted to working with him because he seemed to be a deeply spiritual man. He would often get away by himself for times of meditation and prayer. His family life seemed solid. He had been married for almost twenty years and had four children, the oldest in his teens. I thought I could learn a lot about ministry working with him.

I finally decided to accept another pastorate which allowed me to preach regularly. About a year later, I had not heard from Bob, in spite of a letter or two on my part. When I mentioned it to a mutual friend, he said, "Haven't you heard? Bob left his wife and family and moved in with a woman from his church." I was dumbfounded!

A few months later I was at a Francis Schaeffer conference. I rounded a corner in that crowd of over 2,000 and came face to face with Bob. His countenance reflected his agony. We went out for coffee and he recounted the whole mess to me. It had started when he and his wife went too far as teenagers. She got pregnant and they married under pressure. He had always harbored doubts in his mind as to whether she was God's best for him. Satan used those thoughts as the crack to drive in his wedge—another woman who was "more attractive."

About three years later I saw Bob at another conference in another part of the state. He was there to counsel with one of the speakers, a well-known pastor. I'll never forget the continuing look of devastation on his face. He looked haggard and much older. I hung the memory of his face in the gallery of my mind. I stop and gaze at it whenever I'm tempted to pursue the sin of lust.

A second thing the Lord used to scare me into getting serious about holiness was my responsibility as a father and pastor. Bill Gothard has a helpful diagram showing the "umbrella of protection" which God puts over people through proper channels of authority.

He explains that if a father has “holes in his umbrella,” due to sin which hasn’t been dealt with, Satan can get through to those under the father’s charge.

One hot summer day years ago I was pushing our first daughter in her stroller at the shopping mall while my wife was in one of the stores. The women in the mall were dressed (or rather, *un*-dressed) in native Southern California summer attire. One particularly delectable number walked by, and I found my eyes, true to habit, checking her out. Then I glanced down at our sweet daughter, so innocent in her first year of life. As her father, I would defend her from any foe, human or animal. The Lord stabbed my heart with the thought, “Why are you allowing the worst foe, Satan, access to your daughter through this hole in your umbrella of protection?”

As I reflected on that incident, I broke out in a cold sweat as I realized that not only my family, but the people I pastored would be vulnerable to the enemy if I didn’t clean up my act. You may not be a pastor, but if you’re a Christian, both believers and those outside the faith would be damaged if you fell into sexual sin. The gospel of Christ would be slandered. Realizing how my toleration of lust opened myself and others to spiritual harm scared me. I had to stop messing around with lust!

ADMIT MY SIN AND WEAKNESS

The next part of the battle strategy was to call my sin what it is: Sin! It’s not just a “problem.” It is disobedience to God. I had to put away all of the rationalizations which I had been using to excuse it: “I’m just a normal, red-blooded American man. My thought-life isn’t any worse than any other man’s. It’s not hurting anyone. Besides, I’m faithful to my wife.” No, I’m in disobedience to God when I entertain lustful thoughts.

Another rationalization I often used was to think that if I fed my lust a little bit, it would satisfy my appetite so that I wouldn’t need more. But that was like pouring gasoline on a fire. A little bit of lust for me is like one drink for an alcoholic. It just makes me crave more. I had to make a commitment to be a teetotaler.

I’ve had to learn that I never will become invulnerable against lust. I’ve discovered that when I indulge in a particular sin, it makes me more vulnerable to temptation in that sin for the rest of my life.

For example, I've never taken drugs. You could set a grocery bag of cocaine on my desk, and I wouldn't have any problem throwing it away. But I know some Christians for whom that would be an incredibly strong temptation, because they have yielded to that sin. Having yielded repeatedly to the sin of lust, I have to recognize that I will never become so strong that lust will just glance off me. Whenever I get to thinking that I've finally conquered lust once and for all, I'm in trouble. "Let him who thinks he stands take heed, lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12).

But being vulnerable to lust and yielding to it are not synonymous. I'll never be free from the temptation, but I can be free from the sin. By constantly recognizing my weakness, I am driven to trust in the Lord, who is my strength. "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10).

DEAL WITH MY THOUGHT LIFE

One of the convenient things about the sin of lust is that if you're careful, nobody else knows that you do it. Just make sure you steal your wrongful glances when no one else is watching. Don't look at the magazine rack in a store where people you know might happen by. With those precautions, you can enjoy your sin and nobody else suspects it.

But that's like tolerating cracks in a dam. It's all beneath the surface, where nobody sees it. But sooner or later, the dam will burst and cause a lot of damage. Whenever a man falls into immorality, you can know for sure that he has been tolerating the cracks of mental lust for some time before.

Someone has rightly said, "Watch your thoughts, they become words; watch your words, they become actions; watch your actions, they become habits; watch your habits, they become character; watch your character, for it becomes your destiny." Lust must be conquered at the thought level.

In the context of talking about mental lust, our Lord said, "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away" (Matt. 5:29). Origen took this literally and castrated himself. That takes care of the sex drive, all right! But I'm not persuaded that that's what Jesus meant! What He meant is, *we need to get radical in dealing with*

sin! I've had to get radical by ruthlessly denying myself the luxury of lustful thoughts.

This means forsaking and confessing any lustful thoughts the moment they occur. Memorizing Scripture, such as 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, which talks about "taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ," has helped. That way I can direct my thoughts from the lust to the Lord. I've had to guard what I look at in magazines, even weekly news magazines. I try to avoid reading detailed accounts of sexual scandals—even *Christian* sexual scandals! It's amazing how I can remember sensual pictures or stories years later, but I have trouble remembering a verse I memorized last week.

I sometimes tear pages out of *Newsweek* and throw them in the trash, because I can't read the rest of the magazine without repeatedly looking at the lustful picture. I rarely watch TV or go to movies. I had to throw out a marriage manual because I couldn't handle the explicit pictures. A few years ago when my office was at home, our teenaged neighbor girls, who were amply endowed by their Creator, were outside my study window in their bikinis washing their car. Between gazes out the window, I was struggling to put together a sermon. I finally got up and pulled the drapes, confessed my sin to the Lord, and was able to finish my sermon.

You may think that pulling drapes, tearing pages out of magazines, throwing away books, and avoiding TV and movies is a bit extreme. So is gouging out your eye. I have to deal radically with my thought life to win the war against lust.

DON'T JUST PRAY--OBEY!

Several years ago I heard about a pastor who had a terrible struggle against lust. He actually rewarded himself for finishing his sermon by going to a porno shop! Concerning his battle against lust, he made the statement, "I cannot tell you why a prayer that has been prayed for ten years is answered on the 1,000th request when God has met the first 999 with silence."

Now wait a minute! If you think about it, this man is blaming God for his own sin: "I prayed for deliverance, but God didn't answer. It's His fault!" That offers no hope to the man struggling with lust: "Keep praying, friend. If you're lucky, God will catch you before you go over the falls. But maybe not." Some help that is!

But the Bible never says that the way to deal with lust is to pray about it. It commands me to *flee* (1 Cor. 6:18). It says that I should *cleanse myself* from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God (2 Cor. 7:1). It commands me to *walk in the Spirit* so that I won't fulfill the lusts of the flesh (Gal. 5:16). Pray, yes! But don't just pray: *Obey!*

God puts the active responsibility for obedience in sexual purity on me. Somehow we've gotten the mixed-up idea that actively to deny lust in obedience to the Lord involves the flesh. So we pray for deliverance and go on disobeying as if we can't help it until that magic moment happens. But Paul never says, "Let go and let God give you victory over lust." He says, "Run!" He says that the grace of God teaches us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires (Titus 2:11-12). I need to do it and *can* do it! Otherwise, God wouldn't command me to do it.

Part of fleeing is guarding myself in advance. I used to play games with this. I would go into a store to look at the news magazines (so I told myself). After a few minutes of doing that, I would find myself thumbing through *Playboy* or *Penthouse*, which were always conveniently nearby. ("How could I help it, Lord?") But now I avoid stores where I could be tempted to browse through sexually explicit magazines. The man in Proverbs 7 wouldn't have wound up in bed with the loose woman if he hadn't first gone near the corner where she lived (see Prov. 7:8).

SATISFY MY WIFE

I've heard Christian speakers say that one way to guard against sexual sin is to be satisfied with your wife. It's true that being sexually satisfied with her helps me not to be lured by lust for others. But I'm uncomfortable with the approach which puts the focus on my needs rather than on my responsibility.

My responsibility as a Christian husband is not to satisfy myself, but to satisfy my wife. I've found that my sexual satisfaction is the result of seeking to meet her needs on every level—spiritual, emotional, and physical. When I focus on that, she responds and my sexual needs are met.

A lot of men are sexually frustrated in their marriages because they approach sex to meet their own needs. Jesus' words about

seeking your life and losing it and losing your life to find it (Mark 8:35) apply to sex in marriage. If I approach my wife to satisfy my needs, neither of us feels fulfilled. But if I work at pleasing her, then I'm deeply satisfied. The best sexual times for me are when my wife is pleased.

I've had to tear down my sexual expectations which were built from Hollywood and *Playboy* and rebuild them from Scripture. The world promotes my needs above all else. It knows nothing of the self-sacrifice which our Lord taught. Many Christians have unwittingly bought into this philosophy: "If my wife can't meet my sexual needs, then I'll have to meet them some other way. But my needs must be met." But the Lord's way is that I am to love my wife sacrificially as Christ loved the church. The blessed irony is that when I work at that, my needs are abundantly met. I can honestly say with gusto, "They have been!"

Dwight Eisenhower once said, "War is a terrible thing. But if you're going to get into it, you've got to get into it all the way." That's true in the war against lust. You won't win by being halfway into it. But if you'll get into the battle all the way—*God's way*, using *His* strategy—you *can* win!

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