***THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS: LUST***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

July 22, 2018

Texts: 2 Samuel 11:1-27 and Ephesians 4:17-24

 Of the seven deadly sins that form the basis for this summer sermon series, perhaps none has generated as much interest as lust. No one asked when I was preaching about greed or sloth, but I had more than one inquiry about lust. (I did have one inquiry about gluttony from someone who said she definitely did NOT want to be here that Sunday.) Why all the interest in lust? Perhaps it is because lust is such a significant presence in our culture these days. Lust drives the plot in a host of popular books, movies, TV shows, and online games. It has spawned a thriving pornography industry and has played a role in the fall of prominent politicians across the political spectrum. So pervasive is it that I thought about foregoing the sermon this morning and just inviting personal testimonials from the congregation about the challenges of lust – but I was afraid someone might be injured in the race to the exits.

 As its place on the list of seven deadly sins suggests, lust has been a challenge for humans for a long, long time. As the 19th century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer notes:

*Lust.…exerts an adverse influence on the most important affairs, interrupts the most serious business, sometimes for a while confuses even the greatest minds, does not hesitate with its trumpery to disrupt the negotiations of statesmen and the research of scholars, has the knack of slipping its love-letters and ringlets even into ministerial portfolios and philosophical manuscripts*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Which is to say, none of us is immune to lust’s temptations! While most often associated with sexual desires lust also describes a host of obsessive wants. People lust for power or wealth, for fame or fortune, for revenge or blood, leading to sinful choices and dire consequences. There are all kinds of loves in our lives that bring us great joy, but there are all kinds of lusts that lurk there, intense longings that skew our priorities, warp our perspectives, and lead us down a slippery slope to other sins. Lust is disordered desire on steroids, and it has a long and sordid history.

 There were two men who lived in the same community. One was a rich rancher with flocks and herds as far as the eye could see. The other man was a poor ranch hand who struggled to eke out a living. He had only a single possession – a little lamb he had bought with what little savings he had. The poor man raised that lamb with his children. It ate the same meager food as his family and drank from a tin cup that his children lovingly tipped to its mouth. It had the run of the house and would curl up with his children on cold winter evenings to offer warmth in its wooly coat. It was more than a pet, it was a member of their family. About that time a friend of the rancher came to visit; he loved roasted lamb with mint jelly, so the rancher decided to have a lamb roast. Not wanting to take one of his own flock for the roast, the rancher stole the little lamb from the poor ranch hand, roasted it, and served it to his guest, leaving the poor ranch hand and his children with nothing.

 What should be the penalty for that rich rancher for the theft of that lamb? In some corners of the Wild West the penalty for sheep stealing was death by hanging. The Law in Exodus held that one who steals and slaughters another’s sheep must pay four sheep in restitution. What should be done to the rancher? That was the problem the prophet Nathan posed to King David after his tryst with Bathsheba; the king’s answer embraced the penalties of both the law and the Wild West. An angry David declared:

*The man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity*.

He did *this thing*, this terrible thing, and he had no pity; he deserves to die, said the king. But the words were barely out of David’s mouth, when the prophet Nathan stood and pointed one long bony finger at him and decreed: “YOU ARE THE MAN!”

 In those four words Nathan issued God’s indictment of David for the sins he had committed in his pursuit of Bathsheba. He had fallen prey to

one deadly sin – lust – and had broken at least three commandments:

10. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife

1. You shall not commit adultery

6. You shall not kill

David had wronged Uriah and sinned against the Lord. He had abused his royal power and broken God’s commandments, all because he lusted after Bathsheba. *YOU ARE THE MAN!* indicted David as guilty murderer and adulterer. It named him as the rich rancher, for after all God had given him, David still lusted for more – lusted for Bathsheba – and did not hesitate to act on his lust.

 You heard the story, and while the role of Bathsheba is unclear in the text (was she the innocent victim or the wily seductress?), the responsibility of David is crystal clear. He was the king, the one with power who abused that power. He was the anointed one of God, the one charged with following God’s commands and commandments, the one who set them all aside to satisfy his own lust. David was guilty of adultery and murder. He had Uriah sent to the front lines of battle where the fighting was heaviest, and there Uriah was killed and David’s problem solved – or so he thought. Such was David’s arrogance that he actually thought God hadn’t noticed his sin. He believed God hadn’t seen or didn’t care or tacitly acquiesced in his adultery and murder until he heard Nathan’s words: *YOU ARE THE MAN!*

 In *Crime and Punishment*, Fyodor Dostoevsky tells the story of Raskolnikov, a young man who commits murder and then struggles to deal with his guilt. As time passes, Raskolnikov slowly unravels, guilt eating away at his heart and mind until the crime is revealed and he finds relief from the weight of his sin. King David seemed to feel no such remorse for his actions; he offered no confession or plea for God’s mercy. He scratched the itch of his lust with Bathsheba, then returned to the business of being king. He had Uriah killed so he could bring the pregnant Bathsheba into his home as his wife. Why did David’s heart not ache over what he had done? Why did shame and guilt not eat away at his conscience as it did to Raskolnikov? Was it because he was king, or because he thought he was in the clear?

 The #METOO movement arose because so many men mimicked King David in acting lecherously on their lust and then went on with their lives expecting no consequence for their actions. They went back to making movies or governing or coaching or judging or preaching or running for public office without a second thought about the sinful path down which lust had led them. They gave no thought to the wrong they had done to others along the way – the sexual assault or harassment or abuse they had inflicted – for lust is narcissistic and makes self-satisfaction the end that justifies any means and any actions. The fruits of lust are adultery and abuse, theft and deception, lying and even death. If not restrained, lust leads to misery all around. #METOO is trying to assure victims that they are not alone in their misery, but it also seeks to hold perpetrators accountable and to act as a restraint upon those who are tempted to give in to lust’s temptations, to remind them that there are consequences for their actions! Jesus says that anyone who looks with lust at someone is committing adultery in his or her heart. He knows where lust can lead and so he urges us to restrain it. He calls us to love one another as brothers and sisters in Christ instead of lusting after one another as objects of disordered desire.

 But before you throw too many stones at David and all those men who have let their lusts run wild without restraint, pause and look in the mirror. Do you restrain the lusts that tempt you or do you follow where they lead? Do you accept responsibility for the wrongs you’ve done or do you rationalize and excuse them? Do you confess your sins or do you move on without looking back as if nothing ever happened,

as if you needed no forgiveness,

 as if God hadn’t noticed?

God sees in our hearts what we cannot see. God knows us and knows our sin. God waits for us to repent and embrace Jesus’ new way.

“I have sinned” were words David could not bring himself to say to God. Like the perpetrators of sexual violence whose stories have been told in the #METOO movement, David would not admit what he had done until the words of the Lord cut to his heart – *YOU ARE THE MAN!* David waited for God to come to him, for God to confront him with the truth of who he was and what he had done. It was only then that he confessed his sin, only then that he accepted responsibility for his actions, only then that David realized he was the rich rancher who had no pity on his poor neighbor, the unfaithful man who had done what was evil in the sight of the Lord. He, the King of Israel, God’s chosen one, was that man!

 That MAN includes all those who break God’s commandments to satisfy their own desires, those who lust for what they do not have and let their lusts lead them down the slippery slope of sin. The face of that man is the face of each of us, men and women alike, for no one is righteous, says the psalmist, not one. Not you, not me, not David. All of us are sinners who do what is wrong in the Lord’s eyes and need God’s mercy and grace. Like David we may be better at judging others than we are at recognizing our own sin. We may be quick to judge the terrible sins of others while excusing the little lusts that disorder our lives. We may be slow to admit that we need God’s forgiveness as much as anyone does.

 What then will it take for you to look in the mirror and recognize that you too could be THE MAN or THE WOMAN or THE BOY or THE GIRL of whom Nathan speaks? Must God send another prophet to point a long bony finger in your face? Or might you first go to God and confess, “Lord, I have sinned! Have mercy upon me! Help me do better.” The writer to the Ephesians says that the old self is corrupt and deluded by its lusts. Be a new self, he says. That renewal begins for each of us by confessing our sins, resisting those lusts that disorder our lives, and embracing the way of Jesus who calls us to love God with all that we are and to love – not lust after – our neighbors. For love, not lust, is the way of Jesus! Amen

1. German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer quoted by Simon Blackburn in *Lust: The Seven Deadly Sins* [↑](#endnote-ref-1)