



November/December Plain Truth

A Christian's Guide to Lust

by Keith Stump

Jim (not his real name) checked into the hotel after a grueling six-hour flight. He wanted to unwind and relax before going downstairs for a late dinner.

He turned on the TV and began flipping from channel to channel. His attention was captured by sexually explicit material on a cable movie channel—a woman on the beach, naked from the waist up.

Jim is a Christian and a family man. He felt mature enough to handle a brief nude scene within an action-adventure picture. After all, he and his wife occasionally watched such films after the kids went to bed.

The scene ended, and Jim continued flipping through the channels. He soon came upon a directory of adult films available through the hotel—the hard-core pornography channels. Had his wife been with him, he would have continued his channel surfing. But she was not there.

"Press the 'select' key to view this film," urged the flashing message at the bottom of the screen. After wrestling briefly with his conscience, Jim pressed the key. "Let's see just how bad it's gotten," he rationalized.

During the next three hours, Jim learned "just how bad it had gotten."

He never made it down to dinner.

Sexuality Run Amok

"The greatest challenge facing the church for the next century is sexuality," declares Archibald Hart, former dean of the Graduate School of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California.

Sex can be a powerful positive force for enriching marital commitment. But outside the bond of marriage, sex can be a powerfully destructive force. The consequences of sexual immorality can be shattering—for the individuals involved and for the society that tolerates it.

Today's society is saturated with sex. We're bombarded by erotic stimuli from all sides. Sexual promiscuity is openly portrayed on television and in motion pictures.

The level of what society has come to accept without blushing has risen alarmingly. The obscene four-letter word for the sex act is heard regularly on the street, in the workplace and in the entertainment media--used by men and women alike.

More adult bookstores are in the United States than are McDonalds. But today they've got plenty of competition. Highly graphic pornography is now available in the privacy of any home via cable TV. For

those desiring more personalized service, "dial-a-porn" phone lines and computer sex networks are available.

And what sort of sexual behavior is being portrayed? Indiscriminate, short-lived relationships, partner-hopping, adultery, group sex.

The result?

A sexually confused age. A generation that lacks moral convictions.

Cohabitation before marriage is a commonly accepted lifestyle--and is becoming the rule rather than the exception. (Yet, at the same time, surveys have shown that both men and women prefer virgins as marriage partners, regardless of their own experience.)

Christians are not immune to the moral relativism that pervades modern society.

The warped portrayals of love and sex in the entertainment media inevitably rub off, to one degree or another.

It's Nothing New

The unbridled exaltation of sex has been a concern of the church from earliest times. The moral laxness that plagued the ancient Corinthian church, for example, was a reflection of the immoral attitudes and practices of ancient Corinth itself.

The city's temple to Aphrodite had 1,000 prostitute priestesses in round-the-clock service! The apostle Paul's first epistle to Corinthian Christians urges resistance to that society's casual attitude toward sexual fidelity. We must be honest with ourselves. Sexual temptation is common to humanity. However, many Christians are naive about their ability to withstand sexual temptation.

Jim was. He learned the hard way that pornography is as powerful and seductive as any drug. Having taken the first step, his appetite for pornography grew more and more insatiable. It was the beginning of a downward spiral toward the eventual destruction of his health, his marriage and his career.

It can happen to anyone.

In this important area of life, we cannot afford to make value judgments according to personal whim. Christians, both married and single, must seek to be directed by the revealed truths of Scripture.

The Author of Sex

Pleasure, as C.S. Lewis once pointed out, is God's invention, not Satan's. God is the author of sex (Genesis 1:27). He designed our bodies with the capacity of giving and receiving sexual pleasure.

The God-given sexual impulse is neither vulgar nor evil, no more than the instincts of hunger and thirst that impel us to eat and drink. Nothing evil was created by God (verse 31).

Sexuality is solidly built into human nature. It is a gift from God--for procreation (verse 28), for recreation (Proverbs 5:18-19; 1 Corinthians 7:2-5) and as a unifying experience to deepen the bond of commitment between husband and wife (Genesis 2:23-24).

The marriage union also serves as a model or reflection of the union of Christ and his church (Ephesians 5:31-32). Marriage is an earthly echo of that divine-plane relationship.

Conversely, sexual relations outside of marriage are a perversion of the divinely established model. Adultery is used figuratively throughout Scripture to express humanity's unfaithfulness to God.

Yes, God made us sexual beings. But he also gave us clear guidelines for sexual behavior. Those guidelines are encompassed in the overall admonition to "avoid sexual immorality," defined biblically as premarital and extramarital sex.

The admonition is repeatedly stressed:

- "You are to abstain from...sexual immorality" (Acts 15:29).
- "Flee from sexual immorality" (1 Corinthians 6:18).
- "But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality" (Ephesians 5:3).
- "Put to death...sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires" (Colossians 3:5).
- "It is God's will that...you should avoid sexual immorality" (1 Thessalonians 4:3).

While not fashionable in today's society, Christians are clearly called to hold a high standard of personal morality.

Powerful Repercussions

"Chastity is the most unpopular of the Christian virtues," observed C.S. Lewis in Mere Christianity. "There is no getting away from it: the Christian rule is, 'Either marriage, with complete faithfulness to your partner, or else total abstinence.'"

Why does God place such strict emphasis on sexual responsibility? It is not, as some have charged, to squelch our fun.

God wants us to experience the fullest possible enjoyment of our sexuality. His prohibitions are in no way meant to "cramp our style," but rather to protect us from self-destructive behavior.

Make no mistake: Despite media portrayals of illicit sex without consequences, sexual immorality is always traumatic. It always has profound ramifications, whether immediately recognized or not.

Why?

Because sex involves the totality of a man's or woman's humanity and spirituality. The full array of human emotions is involved. Sex has a powerful impact on the human mind and personality. When one lies with another--exposed and vulnerable--it registers deeply on every corner of one's being.

As a result, many carry the "emotional baggage" of sexual immorality with them for the rest of their lives. Some experience mental pictures called "flashbacks"--involuntary recall of old affairs and former relationships--that place serious roadblocks in the way of marital happiness and fulfillment.

The harmful emotional, psychological and physical consequences of immorality are well documented. Jane (not her real name) speaks for uncounted millions in describing the aftermath of an illicit sexual experience:

"It wasn't at all what I had expected. I thought it would be beautiful. But afterward I felt dirty-- used--empty--guilty. I'm not the same person. Neither is he. The magic is gone. And the pain won't go away."

God's way is not designed to restrict, but to avoid hurt, pain and grief. It both protects us from the negative repercussions of lust and provides for our deepest longings for love and fulfillment.

Love or Lust?

Understanding the difference between lust and love is crucial to attaining a godly perspective on sex.

"Lust is not interested in its partners, but only in the gratification of its own craving," writes British social commentator Henry Fairlie in *The Seven Deadly Sins Today*. "Lust does not come with open hands, certainly not with an open heart. It comes only with open legs."

Those consumed by lust--sinful sexual passion--take something that has its appropriate place in life and lift it out of place, exaggerate its importance and abuse it. They become addicted to the "high" of a sexual experience. The need for gratification takes over their lives. Pleasure becomes a goal--not a by-product--of life.

By contrast, Fairlie explains: "Love wants to enjoy in other ways the human being whom it has enjoyed in bed; it looks forward to having breakfast. But in the morning Lust is always furtive. It dresses as mechanically as it undressed and heads straight for the door."

In its later stages, lust accepts any partner that is available for sexual gratification. It cannot be satisfied. It constantly seeks to replenish itself with new lovers.

Love, by contrast, values the privilege of having been allowed to know someone with such intimacy. It is a vital relationship between two people that involves mutual respect, commitment, self-sacrifice and a shared life.

It takes time to explore and develop such a relationship to the full, as a couple experiences together the joys, sorrows and challenges of life. A dynamic bond is forged. They are "no longer two, but one" (Matthew 19:6).

But the lustful are not prepared to meet the demands that love makes. They do not want to become involved other than on a purely physical level.

And even then, sex is reduced merely to the act. It has no connection to the rest of their lives. It is mechanical, one-dimensional, empty--a series of disconnected encounters.

The God of Second Chances

Jesus was demanding in sexual ethics. Lust, he said, is the moral equivalent of adultery (Matthew 5:28). But, at the same time, he was gentle with those who failed to live up to the standard.

Illicit sex is not the unpardonable sin. To the woman taken in adultery, Jesus declared: "Neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:11).

The first step toward leaving a life of sexual sin is repentance--a heartfelt decision to forsake our sinful past and reorient ourselves to God's will.

There is a living God who forgives and cleanses and allows us to begin afresh! It's never too late to tell God we're sorry. God is a God of second chances--and third chances, and fourth chances and fifth chances. He awaits us with wide-open arms, no matter the number of our failures.

God's grace is available to all who turn to him for help. All guilt and shame are cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ. We are shielded from condemnation by Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

Yes, total forgiveness.

Of every sin.

Now.

Following repentance, we must remain vigilant. We must resolve not to give ourselves over to lust and sensuality (Ephesians 4:19). With God's help, we can control our sexual impulses rather than being dominated by them.

Temptation becomes sin only when we give in to it. As Martin Luther once quipped, we're not able to stop birds from flying around our heads, but we're well able to stop them from building nests in our hair.

Here are a few suggestions for avoiding sexual temptation and triumphing over sexual sins:

- Talk to God about sex. Tell him about your feelings, behaviors, problems and struggles. He understands. He made you to feel sexual desire. Bring your heartfelt petitions to him. Only he can satisfy your deepest needs.
- Resolve to obey. Spend time focusing on the value of your virginity, your celibacy or your marriage. Consider what you have--and what you stand to lose by succumbing to temptation.
- Confide in someone you respect and trust. Seek support and advice about your sexual concerns from a mature, understanding and compassionate friend who will maintain confidentiality.

You need to take this step carefully and cautiously, determining over time the level of self-disclosure you can share. But we all need to be accountable. When you find such a friend, make that person your accountability partner.

- Talk to your spouse about sex. Honest communication is crucial to sexual adjustment in marriage. Share your feelings and concerns with your mate. Sex and intimacy mean something quite different for women than for men.

Women view sex as stemming from emotional intimacy; men see it as a step toward intimacy. Open discussion can help you better understand each other's needs and viewpoints.

- Control the doors of your mind. What occupies one's mind will inevitably influence one's actions. Fill your mind with things that are clean, pure and wholesome (Philippians 4:8).

"Take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). Avoid people, places and circumstances that expose you to arousal and lust (Proverbs 5:8).

- Say no to pornography. Take the offensive against temptation! Reject the use of pornographic books, magazines and films.

Pornography cheapens, debases and pollutes sex. It focuses on organs and acts, reducing sexuality to a mere athletic event. It warps one's sexual perspective, perverts one's view of the opposite sex, distorts one's social life.

It drains the heart and soul out of marital sexuality, lessening the need for one's mate. And it is often the gateway that leads to other, even more destructive behaviors.

Once individuals allow their minds to dwell on pornography, many want to involve others and act it out.

- Educate yourself. Christian bookstores offer a wide variety of titles on Christian sexuality. Books like John White's *Eros Defiled: The Christian and Sexual Sin* (InterVarsity, 1977) and *Eros Redeemed: Breaking the Stranglehold of Sexual Sin* (InterVarsity, 1993) are essential reading for any Christian wrestling with sexual temptations.

- Pray for strength. We are promised strength to resist evil through the power of the Holy Spirit within us. Ask God to fill you with himself and empower you to prevail in your spiritual battles (Ephesians 6:11-18; 1 John 4:4).

- Seek treatment, if necessary. In some cases, you may need to get professional counseling to overcome sexual sins or heal old wounds. Consult a Christian therapist whose spiritual insight and integrity you can trust.

- Don't become discouraged. The road back from sexual sin may not be easy. The old sinful nature continues to exist alongside one's new life in Jesus Christ. To be saved is not to be free from acts of sin.

But remember this: God accepts us on the basis of our trust in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, not our performance. God does not take our religious works in exchange for salvation.

Righteousness is the product of faith in Jesus Christ, not of works (Ephesians 2:8-9). Jesus' victory over sin on the cross is our assurance that we, too, will have the ultimate victory.

Hope for All

It is true that God will judge the adulterer and the sexually immoral (Hebrews 13:4). They will not enter into the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

Yet Scripture offers hope for those enmeshed in sexual sin. No sin puts a person beyond the reach of God's love and transforming grace. In his discussion of the sexually immoral, the apostle Paul declared: "And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (verse 11).

Conforming to godly standards of morality is the only route to happiness and sexual fulfillment--without the guilt, without the shame, without the self-reproach.

Yes, God washes, sanctifies and justifies all those who turn to him in faith. If you haven't already done so, you can come to him today!

Return to Plain Truth Ministries Home Page