

Sermon for April 10: 2005:

Sexual Confusion 2: “The Brier Patch of Pornography”

I have entitled this morning's sermon the “Brier Patch of Pornography” because when men are seduced by the lure of pornography, the viewing of this material entangles us, much in the same way as being caught in a thicket of briars. If any of you have ever gone walking in the woods and stumbled into a brier patch you will know how difficult it can be to free yourself from these thorny stems. No sooner have you loosed your sleeve than your pant leg is caught. No sooner have you loosed your leg than a thorn has latched on to the back of your sweater.

The same is true with pornography, and more so. I got caught in its prickly stems as a thirteen-year, at a church run choir camp. I was introduced to these lurid magazines by peers and men twice and even three times my age. For the next eight years I was enthralled by pornography's seductive power and walked deeper and deeper into the thicket. It was on October 5 1982, that I decided to leave the brier patch. I lived in Montreal at the time, and was on my way to buy a pornographic magazine, when I noticed the headline in the Montreal Gazette announcing the death of the great Canadian classical pianist Glen Gould. Being a piano major at McGill University, I bought the paper instead of the magazine. I have never looked at a pornographic image since. However the scratches left on my heart because of those years spent in the brier patch of pornography have taken many years to heal.

Now I understand that for women the lure of pornography takes on a different form. For females it is not the purchasing of pornographic material that is as much at issue as it is getting lost in the world of romantic fiction, film and television. As women enter into the world of Harlequin novels, afternoon and evening soap operas and movies of this genre, I would suggest they are looking to satisfy a craving in the female heart for a sense of connection. But this too can be a brier patch. As women get lost in these idealized worlds, they can become less satisfied with the world where they are living and the flesh and blood relationships with their own husband or significant other. Their man, their relationship, can never match the ideal of romance portrayed in these fantasy worlds.

The Brier Patch of Pornography is alive and well.

According to the American Bookseller Association reports, and from tallies in Ingram's catalogue of all book releases.

- Romance generated \$1.63 *billion* in sales in 2002.
- There were 2,169 romance titles released in 2002.
- Romance fiction comprises 34.6% of all popular fiction sold.

To compare:

- Mystery/Detective/Suspense is 23.1% of popular fiction sales
- General Fiction is 24.1% of popular fiction sales .
- Science Fiction/Fantasy is 6.5% of popular fiction sales
- Religious, westerns, male adventure, general history, adult and movie tie-ins was 11.9.% of popular fiction sales.

There is no other genre of book that sells more numbers than Romantic novels.

When it comes to the consuming pornography consider the following:

- Spurred by changes in technology that make pornography easier to order into the home than pizza, the business of selling sexual desire through images has become more than a \$10 billion annual industry in the United States, according to Forrester Research of Cambridge, Mass., and the industry's own Securities and Exchange Commission filings.

- On the Internet, sex is one of the few things that prompts large numbers of people to disclose their credit card numbers. According to two Web ratings services, about one in four regular Internet users, visits one of the more than 60,000 sex sites on the Web at least once a month -- more people than go to sports or government sites.

There has never been a time in history where it is so easy for so many people to be caught up in the briar patch of pornography. As we think about what I have just finish saying, listen again to what Jesus says:

27 "You know the next commandment pretty well, too: "Don't go to bed with another's spouse.' 28 But don't think you've preserved your virtue simply by staying out of bed. Your heart can be corrupted by lust even quicker than your body. Those leering looks you think nobody notices--they also corrupt.

Jesus knows only too well that the heart is corrupted when given the freedom to roam the internet and contemplate the Harlequin world.

Lust is destructive to the heart on many levels. This is particularly so because of what it does to destroy the marital bond.

The purity of marriage includes exclusive devotion to one another in every aspect of a couple's life, and this commitment excludes wanting another person or giving oneself in any way to another person. Looking lustfully at another woman breaks the bond of oneness that a man has with his wife..

This not only makes common sense but also has scientific

support. Emotional arousal causes the release of epinephrine in your brain that chemically burns the pictures into your permanent memory. This enables those airbrushed and digitally enhanced pictures of women to remain with a person through adulthood, and they can emerge at the most inopportune times.

A 34-year-old woman who discovered that her husband—a minister—had an online porn habit noted. “How can I compete with hundreds of anonymous others who are now in our bed, in his head? Our bed is crowded with countless faceless strangers, where once we were intimate.”

Relationships are not only threatened by competing online images. Many become threatened by real life affairs inspired by online experimentation. Here is a way for the Harlequin story line to become written by two people in a chat room. The woman hears the man present himself in an idealized way, and she responds in kind. Women who go to chat rooms just to find someone to talk to are often overwhelmed with sexual banter. Even when they find someone who doesn't seem interested in sex, their conversations can eventually become sensual—especially when they are trading deep secrets and strong passions. “Men tend to give intimacy in order to get sex,” says psychologist Dr. James Dobson, “and women tend to give sex in order to get intimacy.” Internet chat rooms and newsgroups have a way of bringing those tendencies together. A man who only seems interested in discussing the challenges of being a divorced parent of teenagers can soon begin to pry about erotic interests.

Furthermore, a woman who has invested in such a relationship and allows it to meet a need for her may decide to respond. A relationship that can only be sustained by camouflaging problems and indulging in passionate pleasures is headed for disaster.

Getting along with the opposite sex is often difficult and sometimes downright exasperating. The effort that goes into maintaining a vibrant and mutually fulfilling sexual relationship sometimes feels like work when sex is supposed to be fun, right? That's when pornography and the romantic ideal can begin to seem more interesting. But no matter how alluring or inviting the scenario, it's a poor substitute for the real thing. And frankly, it's a cop-out from building a meaningful relationship with a real person. By focusing so strongly on meeting a need for sexual arousal without addressing sexual intimacy, Internet pornography and romance inevitably leads to disappointment. Unfortunately, thousands of men and women have already followed the siren song of Internet sex—finding more than they ever bargained for—but not finding the fulfillment they most desired.

It's worth mentioning here that the noun Harlequin means “a character in comedy and pantomime with a shaved head, masked face, variegated tights, and wooden sword.” An online chat room is a place where Harlequins can show up at any time and people are swept away by this internet pantomime.

Jesus illustrates the seriousness of lust through two graphic examples: "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away" (5:29), and "if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away" (5:30). Most people being right-handed, the right side often stood for the more powerful or important side. The eye is the medium through which the temptation first comes to stimulate the lust, and the hand represents the instrument by which the lust is physically committed. So Jesus uses hyperbole (deliberate exaggeration) for the sake of emphasizing the seriousness of single-hearted devotion—single-eyed and single-handed commitment to one's spouse.

So let me ask you to consider the following question: Are you caught in the briar patch of pornography, romantic fiction or online chat rooms? If you are and you want to be freed, I have good news for you. There is a way out. It will not be easy and you won't be able to do it alone. If you are really caught in the thicket you will need others to help you be freed from those pesky nettles. But this is what you will need to consider.

1. Face the problem.

First of all you will need to face the problem. Addictive lust feeds on the darkness of denial. You need to be able to confide in another person that you are caught and cannot get out. Are you willing to do this if you are in this place? The Church is that place where we can admit that denial is not a river in Egypt but a force so strong that if we stay in its current we will drown. If you are in this place, don't let another week go by without naming your struggle. I would suggest that if you have no one in whom you feel you can confide this information, please e-mail or phone me. My church e-mail address is secure. No one else has access to it. So too is my personal voice mail.

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. That is the point Jesus is making when he says:

29 "Let's not pretend this is easier than it really is. If you want to live a morally pure life, here's what you have to do: You have to blind your right eye the moment you catch it in a lustful leer. You have to choose to live one-eyed or else be dumped on a moral trash pile. 30 And you have to chop off your right hand the moment you notice it raised threateningly. Better a bloody stump than your entire being discarded for good in the dump.

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 can be helpful 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.

I know that for me much of my struggle with lust was lessened when I dealt fully with the ways I had been sexually abused as a teenager.

Honesty and repentance are crucial to change. Repentance is the ongoing process of sanctification, (becoming more like Jesus) 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 and the deepening desire to ask the Holy Spirit to help us change.

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, for example, 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 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 loving grace of Jesus. 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.

4: 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 pornographic lust in all its forms.

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 heart's 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 and so turn away from the brier patch of pornography.