

27 July 2026
St Georges, Epsom
10am

LUST. (Passages: Job 31: 1-12, Matt 5: 27-30. Psalm 51:10)

Introduction

So, I have a guilty pleasure – hardly anyone knows about

- But when it strikes – it takes over my life
- Even when I am not doing it, I am thinking about doing it
- Often do it at night,
- At the end I am exhausted and promise myself this is the last time, but within a few weeks I am back at it again

You see I love nothing more than a good jigsaw

- But what starts as a distraction on a rainy day
- Takes over my thinking – especially those Wasjig ones where you must guess the picture you are making
- Never less than 1,000 pieces
- Takes over our home – squeeze in around the dining table – jigsaw pieces nicely sorted in piles
- Takes over our marriage – “just 5 more pieces” and two hours later I sneak into bed
- Takes over my mental health – as nearing the end I count the pieces and realise I am one short!

You might say “mate don’t worry – my mother loves a good jigsaw” but you would never fess up to doing the odd jigsaw yourself, yet those who scoff the most are secretly the most addicted.

Outing myself as a good ‘jigsawyer’ is the guilty pleasure I am reluctantly happy to share with a largely middle-aged congregation. For I guarantee I am not alone – across the parish there will be at least a handful of half-finished jigsaws just waiting for your return from church.

Like ‘jigsawyering’, lust is the guilty pleasure that can take over our lives, our relationships and our homes. Except it is the guilty pleasure we **never** talk about. I might be mildly embarrassed at being outed as a closet ‘jigsawyer’, but I would never ever ‘fess up to lust – even to my closest friends.

- Which makes this sermon a bit tricky. Because my interest in the subject is slightly more than academic.

- I suspect I am not alone.
- So perhaps it's time we all talked.
- About the guilty secret which is no respecter of age, gender or our relationship status.

Lust

Lust covers a multitude of thoughts and behaviours – ranging from idle fantasies about the next-door neighbour's wife, through to the dark vice of pornography, and ultimately emotional if not physical adultery. What makes it more challenging than ever is its availability. Where once you browsed an older brother's magazine carefully hidden at the top of the wardrobe, today your browser is just one click away from hardcore pornography and your algorithm primed to offer you a steady diet of increasingly graphic treats.

It is ubiquitous –

- not just the domain of grubby 14-year-old boys
- 39% of visitors to porn sites are women

Average age for first time exposure to internet porn is 12 years old

- in middle age it shows up as a coping mechanism: temporary relief from the mundaneness of life, escape, relief, excitement and distraction
- Lust is not always about sex. Sometimes it's a response to marital disappointment, loss, loneliness, boredom, stress or a hunger to feel desirable again

Lust is classified as one of the 7 deadly sins, which is perhaps surprising:

- Afterall, we justify to ourselves, no one need know
- No one gets hurt
- Bit of a harmless distraction, helps me go to sleep
- Absolutely no intention of acting on it
- Surely everyone does it – at least, that is, when they are not doing a jigsaw

But clearly the ancients had a very different understanding of its power to destroy our soul.

Recall, you will not find a reference specifically to the seven deadly sins in the bible, instead they emerged in early monastic theology around the 4th century. They were conceived of as a diagnostic tool for naming the deep vices from which other sins grow. They are considered deadly because they kill freedom, distort love and pull us away from God. They are a map of the disordered heart.

What does the Bible have to say?

One of the many things I love about Scripture is its bracing honesty. It has no problems at all talking about lust, its prevalence and potency.

Desire is good - just read Songs of Solomon if you have any concerns on that point.

Desire is often the prelude to love.

Scripture tells us the problems come when desire is detached:

- from love,
- from covenant,
- and from truth
- Lust turns love into consumption and eats us up in the process.

Lust is not desire – it is disordered desire of the eyes, the heart, the imagination and the will.

Job acknowledges how our heart is led by our eyes. It is not just what our eyes see, but what the heart does with what it sees. “If my heart has been led by my eyes”

He warns that lust is a ‘fire that burns to destruction.’ Today’s reading is towards the end of his defence to God on his character. He points out to God that he has entered a “covenant with his eyes to never look lustfully at a girl.”

Proverbs 5 and 6 acknowledge that lust rarely appears as destruction at first. It promises excitement, secrecy, admiration, sweetness and escape, but this inevitably leads to loss, foolishness and pain. Lust promises intensity but it steals intimacy. It promises freedom and creates captivity.

Jesus teaches that the heart commits adultery long before the body does. “You have heard it said do not commit adultery, but I tell you that anyone who looks (Greek is ‘stares’) at a woman has committed adultery.

He echoes Job’s warning about the eye and its connection to the heart but goes further to say “if your right eye causes you to sin, then gouge it out and throw it away” – the absence of eye patches today suggests to me there are not too many bible literalists in our congregation.

The epistles call Christians to not only avoid immorality but to honour the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit, to walk by the spirit and learn holiness, self-control and love. It is a call to chastity – a rightly ordered love which values fidelity and intimacy and successfully integrates sexuality into the whole person.

Chastity means:

Single person – honouring your body and others, cultivating friendship, vocation and holiness

Married couple – chastity means faithful, tender, truthful, self-giving love

Widowed/Divorced/Separated – grieving honestly, resisting loneliness driven compromises, discovering that your capacity for love has not ended

Why is Lust so damaging?

But why does Scripture take lust, this seemingly private indulgence, our guilty pleasure so seriously? What makes it so damaging?

Double life - it happens in secret and often in our minds. Hidden habits that take a lot of energy to cultivate and maintain - energy that must come from somewhere. Energy that could otherwise be committed elsewhere – to those we love, to deepening our relationship with God, to serving others.

It objectifies people – no longer do we see them as a whole person made in the image of God – but as a series of captivating body parts, a fantasy we create and use for our own pleasure. Lust only works if we de-humanise that which we lust after.

Appetite that is never satisfied – in Job’s words “the fire that destroys.”

Fred Beuchner writes “lust is like a thirsty man craving more salt”

The risk is what starts as a harmless fantasy over time opens the door to far more pernicious habits – as you crave more and more salt.

Sin forms us – repeated indulgence reshapes desire.

It inevitably leads to emotional if not physical adultery – an affair of a disordered heart. And don’t for one minute think your partner if you are married is unaware of this. S/he may not know the why, but they feel acutely the emotional withdrawal.

Withdrawal of intimacy – lust inevitably makes true intimacy impossible

1. **Intimacy with God** – our relationship is mediated through our shame. This is no passing flirtation but for many a lifelong battle – the thorn in the flesh that seemingly no amount of prayer seems to remove. But as Josh said in his sermon kicking off this series - God does not love us, */If* we are good. God loves us because God is good.
- **Intimacy with others** - It is profoundly isolating – the guilty secret we never discuss with our partner. Leads to an emotional withdrawal as we seek temporary relief over the hard work of building and sustaining intimacy
- **Intimacy with ourselves – self-loathing at our lack of impulse control**, Jeremy reminded us of the theologian *Cornelius Plantinga*, who said that “sin is the culpable disturbance of God’s shalom.”

How do we restore a disordered heart?

“Purify my heart”-

Psalms 51 composed by David after he has committed adultery with Bathsheba.

It is a case study in how lust can lead to betrayal:

- David is idle – for the first time he has not gone to war
- His eyes gaze across the roof tops and linger on Bathsheba bathing
- An infatuation which ends in betrayal, murder, the death of a child and lifelong consequences – what is done in the dark always comes to light

Who among us has not prayed those words “purify my heart”?

As anyone who has grappled with feelings of lust will attest – it isn’t easy.

- Feels impervious to prayer – how many times do you pray take this sin away from me
- From experience – it is not cured by negotiation
- It is seldom cured by will power – for the simple reason that lust is often the reflection of a much deeper pain or need
- Like Paul – I know what I want to do, but I seem incapable of doing it.
- It feels like we are in the grip – a never-ending history of regret, betrayal, shame, confusion etc

Christ came to redeem the whole person – body, mind, memory,

In weakness he is made strong

How do we change?

I am not a counsellor or an addictions specialist - if serious and compulsive – professional counselling may be needed – especially if abuse, betrayal, coercion or abuse involved

You have more agency than you think. Jesus calls for radical action – if your right eye offends, tear it out and toss it away. (Mt 5).

I opt for Martin Luther’s oft quoted advice:

“You can’t stop the birds flying in the air, but you can stop them nesting in your hair” –

So how might we stop nesting birds?

- **Bring it into the light** – confession, trusted accountability, pastoral care
- **Learn your triggers** – pain, loneliness, fatigue, resentment, boredom, alcohol, travel, stress

- What am I seeking when I am gripped by lust?
- What pain, boredom, anxiety or loneliness tends to precede temptation?
- In what settings am I most triggered to fantasize?
- How do I justify the secrecy?
- **Guarding your attention** – media, fantasy, private digital habits, the second look

“Attention is the beginning of devotion” – Mary Oliver

This is even more of a challenge in the digital age:

1. Do not feed fantasy
 2. Do not linger
 3. Curate media
 4. Avoid private patterns that repeated lead to secrecy
- **Rebuild real intimacy** – especially in marriage – honesty, affection, tenderness, conversation, forgiveness, fun, prayer. Lust thrives when intimacy has gone quiet.
 - **Spiritual Disciplines/Practices.**
When Karen and I were talking about this sermon, she wryly observed that is a tad difficult to lust after a person you have just prayed for.

Postscript

Before I finish – there are likely to be people here who have been scarred by, and have scarred others, through sexual sin – emotionally and maybe physically.

Hearing sermons, such as this, can unintentionally leave you feeling even more condemned, shameful and despairing.

Can I just make three quick points:

Don’t give up hope – Jesus came that we might know life in all its fullness – physically, emotionally and relationally. He did not come to condemn. Remember Jesus is the one who refused to condemn or shame the woman caught in adultery – though he calls her to sin no more. He came to show us what love looks like. In our weaknesses, God is made strong.

Conviction is good, shame is a cruel. Shame is the number one means weaponised by principalities and the powers to isolate us from intimacy with God. We start to believe that our sinfulness is the only lens through which the Lord sees you. I think God has less of a problem with sin than we do. The Lord knows we are beautiful but broken. Remember Jesus entered this world and fully took on our pain. He wept.

Accept God's grace - beauty in the struggle – give yourself some grace. This is not a license to sin, but it is an acceptance that we can't do this on our own.

Conclusion

You may feel you are in the vice like grip of lust, dismayed and self-loathing, but you have more agency than you probably realise:

This week:

Confess – maybe it's for the 1000th time but change the prayer from “help me stop lusting” to “teach me how to love.” I have a feeling this is a prayer that God delights in answering.

Cut off — remove one source that feeds fantasy or secrecy.

Cultivate — practice one act of rightly ordered love this week: tenderness, honesty, apology, prayer, service, or renewed friendship.