

Love, Lust, Covetousness, and Appreciation

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God says in the Ten Commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” and “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house, [or] wife, [or servants or animals,] or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Mt. 5:27-28).

Jesus calls for moral purity in all relationships. This is a key element of holiness. Jesus’ words explain the meaning, I think, of both the prohibition on adultery and on covetousness.

Love is a relationship in which a person (that is, each person) deeply desires what is best and most wholesome and healing for the other. Lust is self-centered; it is selfishness in relationships. It is the desire to gain personal satisfaction from the other (usually another person) without regard for the well-being or best interests of the other.

The strength of love and lust depends on the power of the kind of desire involved. Since sex is one of the strongest (in many cases *the* strongest) human desire and drive, sexual love and lust are especially strong. But we know that people can love (properly) or lust (improperly) in other areas of life than sex—e.g., food, possessions, social position, power and influence—the list goes on.

Covetousness is closely related to lust because it is the desire to possess what legitimately belongs to another. Thus it seems to me that covetousness and lust are in many cases the same thing. If a man “covets” his neighbor’s wife, presumably that is a form of (or closely related to) lust.

Lust or Appreciation?

But then there is *appreciation* of that which is attractive or beautiful without desiring to possess or manipulate the object of appreciation—whether a person or a work of art or a home or a natural landscape. This, it seems to me, is a legitimate form of love, consistent with holiness, and not lust or covetousness.

I see a beautiful work of art. I am attracted to it esthetically and emotionally. If then I enjoy the art, am grateful for the beauty, but do not seek to “own” or possess or manipulate it selfishly, this is a legitimate form of love, compatible with holiness.

The issue becomes more complex in personal relationships (particularly gender relationships) because of the power of the sex drive and of sexual attraction—especially in a highly sexualized culture. I see a beautiful woman. As a man, I am attracted both esthetically and sexually (probably not aware of any difference between the two). Is this lust (selfish, sinful), or legitimate appreciation? It is legitimate appreciation if I am content

merely to recognize the attractiveness, but (1) do not desire to possess it (that is, her) personally, selfishly; and (2) do not continue to focus on the person (voyeurism), but move on to other matters. The experience in this case inhabits the larger context of legitimate love for God and for God's world and all God's creatures. It is pointless and ultimately counterproductive to try to deny the attractiveness or to think that it is in itself evil.

Jesus said, "Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." To look at a woman lustfully, I think, means (1) to desire to manipulate and possess the person—that is, to be sexually intimate with her, and/or (2) to continue to focus on the person; to allow one's attention to linger on her (actually, or in thought and imagination) beyond the point of mere appreciation; to become obsessed with and to desire to possess, crowding out other matters to which one's attention should be directed.

The situation is somewhat different, I think, if I see a woman (beautiful or not) who is dressed or acts in a sexually provocative manner. Here it is almost impossible for most men to have legitimate esthetic appreciation without lust. So in this case a man must immediately turn his attention away ("avert his eyes"). He can have compassion for the person (as Jesus did) and perhaps pray for her, or in indirect ways (through another person) seek to help her, but he must not focus on her.

The only exception, I think, would be in the case of a person (a man) who has a definite calling and charisma from God to minister to such women. (I think for example of Christians who have a legitimate redemptive ministry to prostitutes.) And even there, recognizing the danger, the person ministering needs to be in accountable relationship with other Christians, a Christian community, because of the inherent dangers.

"As he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'" (1 Peter 1:15-16).

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