

Lust & Modesty: “I Have Made a Covenant with My Eyes...”

1. What do we mean by ‘lust’?

- ‘Lust’ is a major category of sin (Gal. 5:16-17, Jas. 1:14-15, 1 Jn. 2:15-17).
- All of the above passages use the same Greek word group (*epithum**).

Generically this term refers to a strong desire. When used negatively, it means a self-centered desire that runs beyond or contrary to the boundaries established by God’s Word:

“It expresses the deeply rooted tendency we have to find the focus of our life in ourselves, to trust ourselves, and to love ourselves more than others. Paul equates this tendency with the flesh and its passions (Eph. 2:3), the powers that draw sinners away from God. The power of the ‘old self’ is seen in its ‘deceitful desires’ (Eph. 4:22).”¹

- Using this same word, Paul teaches that God’s judgment upon those who refuse to honor and thank him (Rom. 1:18-25) is to “give them up in the lusts of their hearts” (v. 24).

2. It is important to remember that Scripture condemns not *sexual* desire, but *lustful* desire:

- “But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matt. 5:28). Theologian John Murray wrote:

“The line of demarcation between virtue and vice is not a chasm but a razor’s edge. Sex desire is not wrong and Jesus does not say so. To cast any aspersion on sex desire is to impugn the integrity of the Creator and of his creation. Furthermore, it is not wrong to desire to satisfy sex desire and impulse in the way God has ordained... What is wrong is the earliest and most rudimentary desire to satisfy the impulse to the sex act outside the estate of matrimony. It is not wrong to desire the sex act with the person who may be contemplated as spouse if and when the estate of matrimony will have been entered upon with him or her. But the desire for the sex act outside that divinely instituted and strictly guarded sanctuary which God has reserved for the man and his wife alone is wrong.”²

3. Combatting sexual lust is the major focus on the seventh commandment:

- *What is forbidden in the seventh commandment? (Shorter Catechism #72)*
The seventh commandment forbiddeth all unchaste thoughts, words, and actions.
- *What are the duties required in the seventh commandment? (Larger Catechism #138)*
The duties required in the seventh commandment are, chastity in body, mind, affections, words, and behaviour; and the preservation of it in ourselves and others; watchfulness over the eyes and all the senses; temperance, keeping of chaste company, modesty in apparel; marriage by those that have not the gift of continency; conjugal love, and cohabitation; diligent labour in our callings; shunning all occasions of uncleanness, and resisting temptations thereunto.
- The old word ‘chastity’ has the sense of “sexual self-control according to God’s Word.” As the catechism summarizes, pursuing it in ourselves and others requires certain specific efforts:
 - 1) watchfulness over our eyes and senses, 2) ‘temperance,’ 3) keeping ‘chaste’ company, 4) modest dress, 5) marriage and its duties (for those without the gift of ‘continence’), 6) diligence at work, and 7) avoiding occasions/temptations to uncleanness.
- With the exception of (6), the key to all of these is guarding our own/others’ *sensory inputs*.

¹ Moisés Silva, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 2, ‘epithumeō’.

² John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 56.

4. Avoiding/resisting lust requires serious discernment in our media consumption:

- Our basic, guiding principle here should be the pattern we observe in Scripture itself:
“Perhaps there was a reason for so much indirect material, for the Bible’s frequent brevity, vagueness, and lack of detail regarding sex and violence – and for the euphemisms found so often even in the original Greek and Hebrew terminology. In our sex-and-violence-obsessed culture, perhaps the Bible is useful as an aesthetic guide not only in what it does say and show, but also in what it doesn’t.”³
- The Bible is not ashamed to describe sexual intimacy (e.g., *Song of Solomon*) or sexual sin, yet it does so with a veil of euphemism and indirection – sufficiently transparent to be understood, yet adequately opaque to avoid triggering lust.
- To verbal media – books and music – we can apply this standard directly. If a portion of a book or song is speaking in explicit, lust-provoking language, it should be skipped.
- With visual media, we need even more care – for Scripture is clear that the eyes are a primary avenue of temptation (Gen. 3:5-6, 2 Sam. 11:1-2, Job 31:1, Mat. 5:28, 1 Jn. 2:16). If a painting, picture, or portion of a film is lust-provoking, we should avert eyes / skip the scene.
 - This includes total avoidance of all pornographic material – or places in which one would be unavoidably exposed to it (bars/restaurants/etc. where staff dress provocatively).
 - *Larger Catechism #139* summarizes well when it states that the seventh commandment forbids all “lascivious [lust-inducing] songs, books, pictures, dancings, stage plays.”

5. Another major key to avoiding/resisting lust in modesty in how we act and dress:

- What is considered modest/provocative can, to a certain extent, be culturally-conditioned. For example, a number of biblical scholars believe that the apostle Paul’s prohibition against a wife praying or prophesying “with her head uncovered” (1 Cor. 11:5) was not a law for all Christians in all time, but rather a command given in a context where “women’s hair was understood to be an object of intense sexual attraction.”⁴
- Although this specific application may no longer be the case in our culture, the same general principle applies: both men and women should avoid behavior (e.g. “lascivious... dancings, stage plays”) and clothing intended to provoke lust in members of the opposite sex.

6. There is also great wisdom in the catechism’s exhortation to ‘temperance’ and ‘diligence’:

- ‘Temperance’ means self-control, especially with regard to physical appetites. Saying no to ourselves with regard to the misuse of food and drink helps us cultivate a general habit of self-control that will aid us in avoiding/resisting lust. Note: the first instance of drunkenness in Scripture also involved indecent exposure (Gen. 9:21). Drunkenness is associated with sexuality immorality in the apostle Paul’s list of the “works of the flesh” (Gal. 5:19-21).
- Similarly, diligence (hard work) at our regular calling in life reinforces a pattern of self-control and self-discipline that will make it harder for lust to get a foothold in our heart.

7. Finally, it matters whom we spend our time with – acquaintances, companions, and friends:

- David’s son, Amnon, was encouraged by “a friend” toward a scheme of rape (2 Sam. 13).
- Proverbs 2:10-19 connects avoiding wicked men with avoiding the “forbidden woman.”

³ Joseph W. Smith III, *Sex and Violence in the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014), xiii.

⁴ Roy E. Ciampa, Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 517.