

Lent 3 – Lust
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Romans 1:16-32

In the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen. I've had to wear glasses since eighth grade. And as you can imagine, over the years my vision has only gotten worse. And so, I have this funny habit at night, I take my glasses off to sleep, of course, and particularly as I've gotten older at night, certain things wake one up. But I don't particularly want to go to the trouble of putting on my glasses and now that I'm married, I don't particularly want to turn on the light. So, I get up already blind and in the dark thinking that I can somehow make it to the restroom. And I do, but I make it to the restroom kind of like a pinball. I'm bouncing off things, bruising my knees, bruising my elbows. And of course, if you're pressed, you have a certain amount of urgency. And so you're going fast and tripping over things.

And my going to the restroom at night looks a little more like a pro football match than what it should. Because even though I think I know what I'm doing, even though I think I know the familiar way, I can't see and I'm walking in the dark. Now why am I sharing this? Well, you see, when we think about Lent and the Seven Deadly Sins, we are drawing from two traditions. There's the Greco-Roman tradition, primarily the Aristotelian and Platonist tradition, the Greeks. And then there's the biblical tradition, the Pauline and Augustinian tradition. And indeed, our Christian faith is built on the combination and creative tension between these two worldviews. And that's fine. That's what the Lord has given us.

But there is a problem. The problem is these two different worldviews have two radically different ideas about the solution to our problem. The Greco-Roman philosophers generally tell us, when faced with something we don't want to be doing, just stop, try harder. We see it in the self-help culture today. The biblical tradition is, we hear throughout Lent, as those of you who are here no doubt considered in the, great litany has a different emphasis, same problems, but the answer is, Lord have mercy. Not just stop, but Lord have mercy.

If the Greco-Roman is the self-help culture, we might call the biblical, the God-help culture. Listen to the colic for today again. We're going to visit it several times today. "Heavenly Father, you have made us for Yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in You." There's that Augustinian tradition, that's actually Saint Augustine. "Look with compassion on the heartfelt desires of your servants." Why? Why would he need to look with compassion on our heartfelt desires? Because we're blind and in the dark. We think we know where we're going, but we don't. And so then we ask, "Purify our disordered affections."

The romantic tradition, a third tradition in Western culture tells us, "Oh, the heart wants what it wants." And that's true. The problem is, the heart is disordered. We're blind, we're in the dark and we don't know where we're going. See my opinion, and this is my opinion, other theologians would disagree with me, is the problem with this tension, is that the Greco-Roman strain of our thinking produces, ultimately failure. Just stop. What, you didn't stop? And with failure comes shame and guilt and self defeat and ultimately self-hatred.

Whereas I believe the biblical worldview produces a right understanding of the relationship between God and man. It opens the way to forgiveness. Forgiveness opens the way to hope. And hope opens the way to transformation. And why am I saying this today? I'm saying this today because I want to talk about the deadly sin of lust. And both the theologian in the pastor in me are worried, because few deadly sins produce more of a sense of judgment and condemnation of self and others. Few of the deadly sins produce more of a sense of guilt and shame than lust. So, I think it's important as we go forward to stay grounded in that biblical worldview. It's really important to recognize, that because our hearts are restless until they rest in God, that we need to understand that he looks with compassion on

our heartfelt desires, our heartfelt lustful desires. And that it is his work and his will to purify our disordered affections, not something that Les can do on his own.

So, let's look a minute at that biblical worldview. We'll look at it specifically at the Pauline worldview today, because it's really interesting. I'm returning to our epistle reading, specifically versus 21 through 26. Paul is saying this, he says, "For although they knew God...", these people, we can include us in that, "... they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened." Just like Les in the bedroom on his way to the bathroom, they thought they knew where they were going, but they were blind and in the dark. They know God, but they don't honor Him as God. God is an opinion. God is a thought. God is an option. And as a result, their hearts are darkened.

Now, here's the really interesting part. Let's go down to verse 24. He says, "Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity and to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves." Therefore. You know what the word therefore means. Whenever there's, therefore, you have to look at what's before. And what we see is an inversion of what we think. What's common sense wisdom? I mess up, I do something sinful and so I'm spoiled, right? I'm ruined. Paul says, no, no, no, no, no. Your mind and heart go dark, because you don't understand God, and then you do something sinful. In other words, the emphasis is exactly opposite. It's not, I do something wrong and I'm ruined. It's no, I'm blind and in the dark and therefore I do something wrong. It's a huge reversal and it will change our thinking. He's saying, because we can't see the truth about God, because we're in the dark about God and God's truth, that's where the sin comes from.

The pastor in me, when we're talking about lust wants to tell you how important this is. I don't know if you think about this, but whether it's a loved one who's disappointed you, a stranger who's hurt you or you yourself. Most people when they sin, hear me well, most people when they sin think they're doing the right thing. They think they're doing something to alleviate their suffering, their situation. They may even think it's bad. "Oh, I know I shouldn't drink this much, but I got to take the edge off." In other words, they think, they think, they think they're making things better for themselves, even though they're making them worse. Why? Because they can't see and they're walking in the dark.

So what seems good to a man actually leads to death. But it can help us approach our own sin and the sin of others with a little more grace and compassion when we understand that, yes, they're dark, yes, they're trapped in wickedness, but not because they're trying to do something evil. They think they're making things better, when in fact they're making things worse. Because of course, they're blind and in the dark. The heart's affections are disordered. This is true of all the sins will consider, but it's particularly true of lust.

I want to talk about lust, because we don't really know what it is or perhaps we know half of what it is. And I'm aware we're in a multi-generational gathering, so in some places, I'm going to be vague and you have to fill in the blanks, okay? Lust, the best definition I've ever found is that, "It's an intense desire, an intense desire that is disordered." Those disordered affections we talk about. And we get one part of lust really well and we completely ignore the other. If you go back to those Greco-Roman guys, they're two kinds of lust. By the 4th Century, in fact, the original word for lust stops being used by Evagrius and others, and a new word comes in its place. Porneia. Again, I'm going to be vague, but it's not hard to guess what that word's about, porneia. That's where we get the term for all those disordered things that we do that Paul's talking about later in Romans. All those things that consume our cultural fights and our church fights right now, porneia. The disordered affection becomes attracted to bodily pleasure, specifically sexual pleasure.

And again, we think we're doing something that will relieve our tension, that will relieve our suffering, but the fact of the matter is, because we're blind and we can't see and because it's dark, we choose the very thing that makes it worse, not better.

But that's only half of lust. Before the word *porneia* became the big word for lust, there was a wider definition. The original word that the Greco-Romans used to describe lust was actually, *luxuria*. *Luxuria*, that's where we get our word *luxury*. For almost 2000 years, this was also considered part of lust, an intense longing that is disordered. So there was the bodily and the sexual, but there was also this *luxuria* that was considered part of lust, a disordered life of excess or a disordered desire for excess. Now this is important, because one, we need to be able to broaden our conversation, particularly at this cultural moment in our lives. When we make lust simply *porneia*, just *porneia*. Well, it can lead to letting... Well, we can let ourselves off the hook, right? I got a little gray growing. I see a little gray out there, and of course, the freedom that the gray brings as we start going, "Eh, *porneia*. No problem." The passion's cool and we say, "I don't have that problem." But that's only half of lust. *Luxuria* on the other hand, I don't think we age out of that.

Together, certainly, whatever our individual struggles, when we put *porneia* and *luxuria* together, it affects us all. Just look around at our society. Let's think about *porneia* for a second. On the internet, which is primarily, we thought it was going to change the world and open up knowledge and make things accessible. It's primarily a blue place, a place that we didn't think it would become. On the internet 28,258 users are watching porn every second. 20% of mobile device searches are for porn. We live in a world where the American Psychiatric Association, no conservative group, nonetheless tells us that 40 to 50% of first marriages end in divorce. And that would be tragic enough, but 56% of those involve porn addiction, 22% involve infidelity. And brings me no joy to say this.

We live in a hypersexualized culture. The media is helping us and encouraging us as we stumble around in our blindness and in the dark, to redefine things like male and female, right and wrong. And again, please don't hear me flogging people about that, we're blind and we're in the dark. We don't know what we're doing, and we do what seems right to us and it brings us our own destruction. What's clear, is our disordered fleshly desires, *porneia*, is tearing apart people, marriages, family and even culture. And I suspect, gray hair or no, if we're honest, and please no judgment, if we're honest, that struggle is even in this room. If not deeds, at least in thoughts.

Luxuria. Chasing after more, bigger, better. Again, it's media fueled. You know that magazine, *Conde Nast Traveler*, has anyone looked at that besides me? You look at the big, shiny pictures of resorts that it probably costs more than I earn in a year to stay there a minute. The social media ads even, I'll be on Facebook and I'll go, "Oh, that looks like a nice bed. Kate and I need a bed." And I finally get to the price, they hide it very well, and the price of the bed is the price of a small car. It's like the old TV show, *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. If *porneia* is deep within our culture and our media, so is *luxuria*. Look a certain way, dress a certain way. And even if you can't attain to it, desire it. That's really the root of all lust, it's not the action, it's the desire.

I'll give you an example. I brought a prop today. I'm cheap, so I only bought a \$1 lottery ticket because it's just for a prop. Because here's the thing about this lottery ticket. You notice I haven't scratched it off. Do you know why? Anyone know why? Because the minute you scratch it off, the lust is gone. As long as it's not scratched off, Kate and I can dream about that new house built the way we want. As long as it's not scratched off, I can dream about leaving all of you and living a life of travel. As long as it's not scratched off, I am the king of my castle. That's fun as far as it goes, but you see the danger in it, right? And don't tell me you haven't done it. What would you do if you won that? "Oh, well, you know what I'd do?" Friends, that's lust. Probably a more harmless form, but that's lust.

And see, what I like about this, is right now my lust is intact. I haven't been faced with the truth, because I haven't scratched off anything. This is luxuria, right here. Now, if I gave this to you and you won the \$10,000, what would you do with it? It's lust, what you're thinking right now. None of this is new. The poor Samaritan woman today is a woman who, whether it was her fault or those of her husbands, I don't want to judge right now, scholars don't know. She's been caught in the lust of serial relationships. Someone on the side has decided that, "A better future is out there and I just need to change up things." And so, she's gone through five husbands and the man she's living with now is not her husband. Porneia. And she likes the idea of Jesus's living water, but it's not so much that she wants to be saved, she wants a labor saving device. Did you hear her? "Oh, give me this living water, that way I won't have to come down to the well and draw water." She doesn't want salvation, she wants plumbing.

The Israelites today, having been delivered from slavery and walking through the Red Sea with their feet. What a miracle, right? Well, now they're thirsty and they're whiny. Later they'll be hungry. They'll be being fed from heaven and they'll be saying, "You know they had some good leeks in Egypt." Now, I like leeks, but is anyone so excited about leeks that they want to go back to slavery? Yes, those of us captivated by lust. We make the same bad decisions over and over again thinking they'll satisfy us and they never do. And we wind up in a deeper prison every time. Why? Because we're blind and walking in the dark.

So, how do we get out of this mess? Well, there's a corresponding virtue to lust, it's called continence. And if you who work in healthcare, think of continence in terms of the ability to retain control of your elimination functions. And that's true, but there was a deeper meaning to the word continence, and that was... Well we see it best in the cognate word, being content. Being able to hold oneself together. I'm content with what I have. So, if lust is more, better, now, both in the flesh and in the things of luxury. Continence is saying, "I'm good. I'm good. I'm okay."

And how do we get the virtue of continence? The Greco-Romans say, "Try harder." Doesn't work. If it works for you, please tell me, because I'm still trying to learn how to do it. But try harder. Now, the biblical worldview says, if Paul is right today, that we get to continence, not by trying harder, but by beginning to see clearly. Turn the lights on, put my glasses back on, so maybe I'm not bumping into things all the time.

Romans 12:2 puts it this way, "Do not be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds." In other words, I've got to change up here how I see and think if I'm going to be able to fight the things of this world, the Seven Deadly Sins. In this case, porneia, luxuria. It's not a battle so much with my members, although it involves those. It's not a so much a battle with what I do or with lottery tickets or even with the internet, although God knows that's where the problem works itself out. It's a battle in here. I need to begin to see clearly. I need to have my mind transformed. Well, if I said that the Greco-Romans say, "Try harder.", and it doesn't work. Well, who does this then?

Let's go back to the colic. "Look with compassion upon the heartfelt desires of Your servants." Who are we asking to look with compassion? God. "And purify our disorder affections." Who are we asking? God. You get the point? The Greco-Romans say, "Pick yourself up by your bootstraps. Pick yourself up, dust yourself off and start all over again." The Augustinians, the Paulines, our colic says, "You God, look with compassion on my heartfelt affections because they're a mess. They're full of cornea and luxuria. And You purify my disordered affections, that one day I might behold Your eternal glory in the face of Jesus Christ." It's not an inside job. Inside, I'm blind and walking around in the dark. It's an outside job. Someone comes to me and does for me what I cannot do for myself.

The movement's this, I can't. It's called repentance. I can't what? Well, I can't get over the idolatry. Because that's what it is that Paul's talking about, right? They knew God, but they didn't recognize Him,

and then they turned to carved images, or in our case, online images to satisfy their desires. I can't, Lord. I can't, but You can't. You can set me a free from the sin of idolatry. I can't, You can. Save me.

You're transformed by the means of grace, by one another, by the Word, the sacrament, by the Holy Spirit, by being together. It's not so much that we work really hard at it and fail. It's that we keep coming and the rough edges are worn off by the continued presence of God, and we begin to change and the fruit of the spirit begins to grow in us. That sounds really good, but I could be imprecise, so let me be very clear. The fruit of the spirit begins to grow in us. We don't grow the fruit of the spirit, it begins to grow in us, through repetitive practice of being together, of word and table. We root ourselves in the good soil of the gospel and something grows in us.

Porneia, the world says that sexual pleasure is the answer. Boy, we live in that world, don't we? Coming back from Africa, I'm struck by it. I haven't seen the media for 10 years. It's changed. The world says that sexual pleasure is the answer. Faith says, that rightly ordered relationships, first with God, second with ourselves, thirdly, with one another. Rightly ordered relationships are the key. The good news is that Jesus can restore us through the living water He talks about today, the waters of baptism. That old man stumbling around blind and in the dark. The good news is Jesus is willing to drown him dead, so that a new man can rise up who sees a little better.

Luxuria. Well, what does the world value? What does the world value? I did a little research. Do you know the most expensive bread in the world? It's called Gold Leaf Bread, it's from the Pan Piña bakery in Andalusia, Spain. It's \$120 a loaf. What does the world value? In 2018, a bottle of 1945 Romanee-Conti Burgundy sold for \$558,000. What does the world value? The world looks at bread and wine that I'll never afford and says, "This is living." But the problem with it is, I'll eat it and I'll drink it and around about midnight, I'll get up and try and make my way to the bathroom, because I can't see, I'll be bumping around. But the main thing is, no matter how expensive the bread and wine was, it's going away.

Now this bread and wine on the other hand, it's cheap. I don't know what Father Doug pays for it, but I guarantee you it's less than \$558,000 a bottle. And those little wafers, well, I'm not so sure they're bread at all, they look more like plastic. It's nothing special in the world's eyes, right? And yeah, it is God Himself for us. John 6:55, "My flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed." To be in him is real living, not a half a million dollar bottle of wine.

So let's work backwards. The solution to our problems, to the Seven Deadly Sins is right here. Specifically, it's in that book and in that cup and in us together. That's the solution. Our problems, well, we're blind and in the dark, our affections are disordered, so we go after things that do not satisfy, whether of the flesh or of the world. I wonder where I'll be next week if this pays off. If I'm smart, I'll be here. Because when God works in us and we can see where we're going, like Paul says in Philippians, we learn to be content with what we have. Sometimes we're really rich, sometimes we're not, but we're always loved.

The antidote to lust in our lives, I believe friends, particularly if you've been struggling with some of this, and I know some of you have statistically. Let me say it just as a pastor straight to you. I know you can't do it and I know you're beating yourself up and I know the shame gets worse and worse and worse. Right here today, God is here for you. And He will do for you what you cannot do for yourself. He looks with compassion on your heartfelt but broken desires and He is the one who will purify your disordered affections. Because lust ultimately isn't the problem if Paul is right, idolatry is. Knowing the truth about God, they exchanged it for a lie. And so He gave them over to lust. The great thing about being here on a rainy Sunday morning when we had to set our clocks back and half of us forgot, is that here is where the transformation begins. It's not, just do it. Rather it's, He's done it. Amen.