

**“Getting Your Hand Out of the Jar”**

**I Thessalonians 4:1-12**

*Series: Break the Chain Week 3. Breaking the Chain of Lust*

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After speaking at a Christian conference, author and pastor Chuck Swindoll received a letter from a lady who appreciated his humorous and insightful talks. She wrote,

Dear Chuck,

I love your sense of humor. Humor has done a lot to help me in my spiritual life. How could I have raised 12 children starting at age 32 and not have had a sense of humor! I married at age 31. I didn't worry about getting married, I just left my future to God's will. But every night I hung a pair of men's pants on the bed and knelt down and prayed:

“Father in heaven, hear my prayer  
And grant it if you can,  
I've hung a pair of trousers here,  
Please fill them with a man!”

Chuck Swindoll enjoyed that letter so much, he read it to his congregation when he returned from the conference. In the congregation that day were a Dad and his son who was in his twenties. Mom was home caring for their daughter who had a cold. The mother (who knew nothing of the letter) wrote Chuck a note a couple of weeks later. She was brief and to the point. “I'm worried about my older son's sudden strange behavior,” she wrote. “For the last week or so he has been sleeping in his bed with a bikini draped over the footboard.”<sup>1</sup>

Scripture is very clear that God created us to be in relationships. When He looked down on the first human in the Garden of Eden, He said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him” (Genesis 2:18). God's solution to this dilemma was brilliant. Through a little surgery, He created two people out of one. From the very beginning, God's plan is that a man and a woman should compliment each other, match each other, become one in mind, body, spirit and soul through marriage. “For this reason,” the Bible concludes, “a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame” (Genesis 2:24-25).

One of God's most treasured gifts to us is sex. It is one of Lord's very good creations which is intended to intimately unite a husband and wife. Yet we cannot hear the word sex without squirming a bit, without feeling a little uncomfortable, without it conjuring up tempting or seductive thoughts. Adam and Eve felt no shame. But we do. Why? What happened? God created other human desires such as thirst, hunger, work and sleep, yet we do not have the same reaction when those words are mentioned.

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<sup>1</sup> Chuck Swindoll, Strengthening Your Grip, Key-Word Books, 1982, p. 216.

It's especially hard to talk to our children about sex. A little boy asked his mother where he came from. She gave him a tall tale about a beautiful white-feathered bird. The boy asked his grandmother the same question and received a variation on the bird story. Outside to his playmate he said, "You know, there hasn't been a normal birth in our family for years."<sup>2</sup>

The truth is: sex and all human desires can be misused and abused: thirst can become alcoholism, hunger turns to gluttony and overeating, work to cardiac arresting workaholism, sleep to sloth and laziness and sex to an ever widening variety of perversions. The problem is not with these God-given human desires. The trouble lies deeper within.

In our sermon series *Break the Chains: Freedom from the Seven Deadly Sins* we've looked at Pride and Anger. Now we come to Lust. It should come as no surprise that lust and love are not the same. In fact, they are direct opposites. Lust takes, love gives. Lust demands, love sacrifices. Lust is self-centered, love serves the beloved. Lust uses others. Love sacrifices for others. Lust destroys relationships, love makes two people one. Lust is poison. Love is pure and holy. They cannot live together. Even a small speck of lust will spoil love, just as a drop of ink will ruin a bottle of crystal clear mountain spring water. Lust is not just a problem for teens or single people. It is alive and well in marriages. Lust doesn't only apply to sex. It perverts and diverts every human desire from its true purpose.

There is a legend that when the people of India want to catch a monkey, they put a piece of fruit in a large heavy jar with a very small opening. When the monkey reaches his hand in and grabs the fruit, he can't pull it out because the opening is too small to allow his full, clenched fist to pass. Though he could easily escape, the lust for the fruit holds him prisoner until he is caught. Substitute sex, work, food, possessions, or anything for the fruit and you can see why we must find a way to get our hands out of the jar. How do we break the chain of lust?

In his letter to the new born Christians in Thessalonica, the Apostle Paul showed them the way. He wrote,

Finally, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more (I Thessalonians 4:1).

If you want to be free from the power of lust, start with a question that came up in the message about Pride: "Who am I trying to please?" If I live to please me, then I will never be satisfied. If I try to please others and make everyone happy, then I will always be frustrated. But, according to Paul, if I live to please God, then I have found the true meaning of life. God created you. He knows how you operate best.

When it comes to the issue of lust, most churches either ignore or abhor. What we need is to restore. There is a lot of shame around this issue. It seems much easier for people to admit they are alcoholics, workaholics, that they overeat or lose their temper too often. Yet the shame that shrouds lust drives sufferers deeper into the darkness. Unfortunately, lust loves darkness and secrecy. These are the conditions which encourage it to grow. It becomes a closed loop. We need

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<sup>2</sup> Howard Hendricks, Homemade, September, 1989.

instruction on how to come out of the darkness and learn to live God's way. Then we need to practice these instructions more and more. So what are the practical instructions on how to live without lust? Paul gives these instructions to the Thessalonians:

It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God. (I Thessalonians 4:3-5)

Let's pull this apart. First, Paul teaches: **"It is God's will that you should be holy"** (v. 3). How can you and I be holy? The word "holy" probably brings to mind images of a gaunt, joyless group of monks, mystics or martyrs. Nothing could be further from the truth. Holiness is not a magical power. It is not a halo painted over a sinner. Holiness grows slowly in us as we say to God, "Thy will, not mine, be done." Lust says, "Satisfy your hunger and desire by reaching for things or people." The result is that your hand gets caught in the jar. Holiness says, "Only God can satisfy your hunger and desire. Draw closer to God and do His will." James says the only way to deal with temptation is "Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you" (James 4:7-8). Holiness grows in us when we move out of the shadows, out of secrecy and into the Light. Always ask yourself, "Could I speak about these thoughts, desires and actions in public before God, my family and the Church?" If not, then you need to work on holiness.

Second, Paul writes, **"It is God's will that you should avoid sexual immorality"** (v. 3). The word "avoid" means to stay far away. The first people who read this letter in Thessalonica grew up and lived in a culture that was saturated with sexual immorality. Demosthenes, the greatest speaker of the Greek world who lived over three hundred years before Jesus and Paul, wrote, "We keep prostitutes for pleasure; we keep mistresses for the day to day needs of the body; we keep wives for the begetting of children and for the faithful guardianship of our homes."<sup>3</sup>

Look at our streaming movies, cable shows, and Internet sites and you will see not much has changed in 2,400 years. In fact, due to digital technology and smart phones, the distribution of pornography is more effective, widespread and reaching younger populations than ever before. According to the U.S. Department of Justice:

Never before in the history of telecommunications media in the United States has so much indecent (and obscene) material been so easily accessible by so many minors in so many American homes with so few restrictions.

Here are just a few statistics from an Internet filter service called Covenant Eyes:

- 9 out of 10 boys are exposed to pornography before the age of 18. The first exposure to pornography among men is 12 years old, on average. 35% of boys say they have viewed pornographic videos "too many times to count."
- 6 out of 10 girls are exposed to pornography before the age of 18.

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted by William Barclay, The Letter to the Thessalonians, St. Andrews Press, 1954.

- 71% of teens hide online behavior from their parents.
- 64-68% of young adult men and 18% of women use porn at least once every week. Another 17% of men and another 30% of women use porn 1-2 times per month.
- 1 in 5 mobile searches are for pornography.
- 64% of Christian men and 15% of Christian women say they watch porn at least once a month.<sup>4</sup>

It's the new elephant in the sanctuary. There are, of course, many forms of lust in addition to pornography. We've become used to seeing sex scenes in movies and on cable shows that once were shocking. Psychologists who study the effects of lust on the brain discover that it has an addictive power which creates neural pathways which release pleasurable chemicals like dopamine and endogenous opiates. The more a person turns to some form of lust, the stronger the pathway and the greater the craving. At the same time, tolerance grows so your brain needs more of the drug to get the same high. This creates a cycle which feeds on itself and is almost impossible to stop. Sociologist Jill Manning says,

Research reveals many systemic effects of Internet pornography that are undermining an already vulnerable culture of marriage and family. Even more disturbing is the fact that the first Internet generations have not reached full maturity, so the upper limits of this impact have yet to be realized.

So how do we break free from the chain of lust? Just knowing the truth is not enough. It takes action. Don't indulge it. Don't feed on it. In fact, stay far away from it. Try taking a video fast, a TV fast, a media fast for a week or a month. For those who feel caught in the grip of pornography you might try a longer period – counselors recommend ninety days. You will notice two things: first, you'll learn just how much you depend on it and second, you see that you can live without it. Let go of the fruit in the jar.

Third, Paul teaches us, **“It is God’s will that each of you should learn to control his own body”** (v. 4). The literal Greek word for “body” is vessel. Your body is a jar. While you are busy grabbing for fruit in some other jar, lust has a hold of your jar, your body. It's time to get your hand out of that jar and take back your own jar, your body from the clutches of lust. Now your jar cannot remain empty. Lust will come back without warning. So the best defense is to fill it with the Holy Spirit and with the love of Christian brothers and sisters. When temptation strikes, don't fight it alone. Get an accountability partner. Don't give in to it. Instead, surrender your life to God. Call on the power of the Holy Spirit and talk to one trusted brother or sister in Christ who will hold you accountable and help you get back on God's path. I also recommend talking to a counselor and participating in a support group where there are other people who understand the power of this addiction. Please do not hide in the shadows any longer. There's a much better life waiting for you. God can heal your relationships and set you free. Come talk to me, Greg or Gloria and we will help you get on the road to recovery. The Good News is that there is no sin which is unforgivable except the sin of rejecting the help of the Holy Spirit

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.covenanteyes.com/e-books/>

(Matthew 12:31-32). No matter what you've done, no matter how bad you've been, God will always forgive you if you turn from it, confess it and seek His cleansing (I John 1:9).

Vincent Gallagher, a Christian counselor here in the Philadelphia area, shares the story of one of his clients he calls "John." This young man came seeking help. His marriage was on the verge of being destroyed. He truly loved his wife and wanted to please her, just as he wanted to please God, but his preoccupation with sex was so great that he knew he couldn't overcome it on his own.

Early in his teen years, pornography came into his life. It started as a sneak peek. But like all compulsions, it drew him in deeper and deeper. The pictures helped him escape from the pain of loneliness, fear about the future, feelings of awkwardness and emptiness – the sorts of feelings that almost all teens experience. The images worked like a drug – they filled him with euphoria and covered up the pain.

Then John became a Christian. He surrendered every part of his life to the Lord. He meant it. He knew that his compulsive interest in pornography was forgiven. But his "victory" was only temporary. After a while he was deeply into his compulsion again. And now that he was a Christian and knew that what he was doing was wrong, he desperately wanted to stop – but couldn't. He felt like a hypocrite, like the worst sinner who ever lived. He was caught in a cycle of shame.

Along the way, John met and married a lovely young Christian woman. He thought this would solve his problem. Yet soon his wife complained about him not "being there emotionally" for her. She described him as being like a brick wall, unfeeling and aloof. John did love her very much. He just didn't know how to express his love for her in a physical way. Their marriage was in danger of falling apart.

That's when John sought counseling. He admitted he had a problem which he could not solve. He was willing to take whatever steps were necessary to overcome it. He sought God's help and the help of a brother in Christ who could show him the spiritual pathway to healing. John came to realize that the biggest problem in his life was himself, and his inability to deal with his inner pain and insecurities. There were no immediate or magical cures. Recovery was a slow but gradual process. But today his marriage is in good shape and he has four years of victory over his compulsion thanks to the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>5</sup>

Whether your problem is sex, work, alcohol, food or some other desire, I invite you with God's help to let go of the fruit, pull your hand out of the jar, and then offer up your jar, your body, to the Holy Spirit so that He may fill it.

When it comes to lust, you don't want to monkey around.

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<sup>5</sup> Vincent Gallagher, Three Compulsions that Defeat Most Men, Bethany House, 1992, p. 50-52.

