

Is It Lust or Legalism?

Not every thought in your head should be attributed to your heart.

I can still see my church's shag green carpet under my prostrate body and my head bowed in prayer. I was a young man with raging hormones—passionate for God but developing sexually as well.

In an agonizing moment, I wanted to scream out with frustration as I fruitlessly attempted to shut out of my mind sexual images that kept interrupting a holy moment of prayer. Like Paul my cry was: "Who will rescue me from this wretched body of death?" (Rom. 7:24, NIV). I felt dirty, defeated and distant from God.

This frustrating internal civil war continued for quite some time. Finally, after months of struggle, a light of truth illuminated the darkness of my despair. These tormenting thoughts were in my head, yes, but certainly not in my heart.

I knew I had no intention of acting out these fantasies in any way. They were not really me. They were not my goal or my ultimate desire—being faithful and obedient to God was my real passion.

A sense of relief swept over me as I finally learned to ignore these mental images. Not to dwell on them, repent for them or give them undue attention; but simply ignoring them was the strategy that seemed to come from above.

And as I learned to laugh at the ridiculous images and leave them alone, they suddenly began to disappear! Joy returned to my heart, and my prayer life became richer and more intense.

I learned a great lesson through this struggle—not every thought in my mind had to make its way into my heart. I was not the summation of all my thoughts. The “real me” was deeper and more mature than the traffic jam of thoughts and ideas that went through my head.

One of the most common mistakes in defining sinful lust is to attribute to the heart everything that goes on in the mind. Though the heart and mind are related, they are not one in the same. While my mind might be filled with many thoughts and considerations, my heart reflects my real priorities, convictions and intentions.

Not every thought of the mind corresponds to a decision of the heart. Many people assume conscious attraction or sexual desire always exposes sin in the heart. But according to James, desire has to be “conceived” before it “gives birth to sin” (James 1:14-15).

For desire to reach this point of “conception,” one must first be “dragged away” and “enticed.” Simply noticing a beautiful woman and admiring her beauty is not the same thing as being “dragged away” or “enticed.” Temptation must actually lead to some kind of pursuit of forbidden fruit for sin to be born.

Jesus said: “‘Nothing outside a man can make him ‘unclean’ by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him ‘unclean’” (Mark 7:15). What makes a man holy or unholy will not be determined by what comes into the arena of his mind, but by what is prioritized in his heart.

This internal “line” separating the mind from the heart is important to discern when talking about the rightness or wrongness of sexual desire. Sexual desire is God-given, not something to be ashamed of or a demon to be “cast out.” Desire only becomes evil when it becomes obsessive (and therefore idolatrous) or when one begins “acting out” inappropriately in real-life relationships with others.

In His Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus did not condemn physical attraction or sexual desire but adultery of the heart (see Matt. 5:28). Only when lust infiltrates and begins to negatively influence the heart does it have a corrupting effect upon the Christian life. Only then can it truly be called “sinful lust.”

Just because you may feel attracted to others in a physical or even sexual way does not imply that you have necessarily lusted or are guilty of sin. God would certainly not have created beautiful people only to forbid anyone from noticing them! In the same way that you can admire your neighbor’s flower garden without plucking up the flowers and taking them home with you, so also you can appreciate the beauty of others without coveting them!

After experiencing attraction to someone other than their spouse, many Christians feel ashamed and believe they have sinned. In many cases, it’s nothing more than accusation from the enemy! (see Rev. 12:10). The guiltier the devil makes us feel, the less likely we will be to reflect the glory of God.

“False guilt” stirred up by accusations that come from the enemy’s camp can be just as damaging as actual sin in keeping us from our God-given destinies. Our foe throws accusing thoughts into the arena of our minds to make us feel unworthy and separated from God (see 2 Cor. 10:5).

As long as the enemy can get us to focus on failure, temptation or even perceived weakness, we will not be aggressively building ourselves up with the promises of God, seeking His face or discerning His will. Sometimes the enemy creates battles that aren’t even real to distract us from God’s agenda.

When then does the innocent attraction actually become dangerous lust? Some argue that it’s impossible to “draw the line” between the two. I beg to differ. By the leading of the

Holy Spirit and through a proper understanding of biblical teaching, accurate discernment can be made and even Christians with high sexual drives can keep themselves free from sinful lust.

Early Christian monks were prime examples of how damaging legalism can be if it pollutes our understanding of human sexuality. To get the ultimate victory many of these ancient saints took extreme measures: History records that one monk, Ammonius, burned his body with an iron whenever he had an impure thought. Another, Pachon, held an asp against his genital organs.

Benedict threw himself naked into thick briars and nettles tearing his flesh, hoping that the wounds on his body would cure the "lust" wound of his soul. Even Origen, the famous fourth-century Christian leader, castrated himself in an attempt to become completely free of sexual temptation.

Sadly, the very men who made it their goal to obliterate sexual desire actually became obsessed with the very thing they were trying to eliminate! In spite of their valiant efforts, the ancient monks' attempts to abolish all sexual desire simply exacerbated the problem. Their enormous fixation on fighting lust actually had the opposite effect and strengthened its power instead.

God rarely grants people's pleas to be freed from all sexual drives and desires. Even when attempts to eliminate all extramarital sexual stimuli and desire seem successful for a season, they will usually ultimately fail.

Some in trying to accomplish this may experience periodic spiritual highs in intense worship times or at conferences, but often later find themselves discouraged and feeling defeated. In spite of the supposed letdown, God did not abandon them, nor was He unfaithful. For it was never His divine purpose to do away with sexual desire in his people!

Sexual desire is not evil in itself. It's what one does with that desire that ultimately reveals what's truly in the heart.

Many believers still feel distant from God and dirty when they consider their innermost thoughts and desires. "Certainly a holy God cannot be happy with such low, base feelings," they surmise.

We must not forget, however, that the God who created the power of sexual attraction is certainly not offended by its presence. True holiness is not authenticated by a lack of sexual interest, but is instead a matter of the heart, measured by our pursuit of God and love for His people.

Because His awesome presence and power are alive within us, real sexual purity is not just for a few weirdos who hide from the world. It's not an unattainable, pie-in-the-sky dream that some hope for but never find.

On the contrary, for followers of Jesus Christ, sexual purity is real and possible. By God's grace it's a successful, joyful path—free from legalism and full of life. The expected outcome of a heart connected to God and led by the Spirit.

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