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Love or Lust?

Although that summer I had made a decision to save sex for marriage, I still had to deal with the sexual passions stirring within me. Prior to my encounter with God, I was extremely lustful. Whether it was messin' around with girls in the back stairways of our high school, in the woods, or at their crib—it didn't matter. Hey, the game was about self-gratification. In fact, some of the things that attracted me to the entertainment industry were that it offered money, fame, and plenty of "honeys"—all of which were extremely important to me at the time.

However, dealing with that attitude had become a major battle for me, once the God factor kicked in, because those desires did not instantly disappear. Instead, I had an internal war going on as I tried to

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cope with a set of emotions that were contrary to the nature of God. “*God is love*” (1 John 4:16). Once I had been confronted with His love and allowed that to be the driving force with which I saw everything around me, it was more difficult for me to yield to lust.

I can remember the first party I went to after encountering God’s love. I was enjoying the music and the food and having a great time. It was all good until I made my way to the dance floor and got close to a young lady. I will never forget how awkward I felt dancing so close and rubbing against her body. It really felt unnatural, and to my surprise, that shocked me. As I was working through this inner conflict, the Lord helped me understand that I felt awkward because His holy presence doesn’t include “freak dancing.” Behavior and movements that were formerly driven by lust didn’t bring the same satisfaction once I was driven by God’s love within me. I can also recall opportunities in college to have relationships with sisters that would involve sexual intimacy. In each case, I explained how I could not offer them myself because I was aware of a greater love than that which they were searching for. Although they weren’t aware of it, they were attracted to me because of God’s love and presence in my life rather than any physical attribute that I had to offer. It was and still is my passionate awareness of God’s love and presence in my life that keeps me from engaging in anything that would cause distance in my relationship with God.

Too many of us
have settled for a
counterfeit motivation in
our sex lives: lust.

Love is one of the most powerful motivating forces for human behavior. Most major religions teach and most people believe that love is virtuous and is something all human beings desire. I contend that giving and receiving unconditional love are one of the most basic human needs that stems from our emotional and spiritual nature. Can you imagine being with someone who loves you just because you are who you are? In other words, they admire, respect, accept, and adore you. There is no pressure to perform or live up to a certain standard by which you will receive their love—it's unconditional. Even when they find out the bad and the ugly sides of who you are, their love is still present and strong. They just want to be with you because you're—you. This exchange of perfect love is found in intimacy, and it is this intimacy that our hearts and spirits need, to experience a deeper level of meaning when it comes to sex. However, too many of us have settled for a counterfeit motivation in our sex lives: lust.

Movies and television shows that glamorize

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uncommitted sex create a false impression in the minds of viewers. Such entertainment choices suggest that unbridled lust offers the most appealing and fulfilling sexual experience. They also frequently espouse the idea that there are many “shades of gray” between love and lust, boldly endorsing the concept of situational ethics over unchanging convictions.

That one-night stand in the movie *Titanic* or that extramarital affair in any given soap opera are portrayed as expressions of love between two people who should otherwise be in a lasting relationship. If it were not for their individual circumstances, which are “tragically” keeping them apart, the two lovers would gladly exchange their unhappy lives to be together forever. Right. In real life these circumstances translate into confusion as the people involved typically try to justify their actions.

Sadly, the young lady to whom I lost my virginity could have easily been influenced by the impetus of this kind of dramatic and impressionable, but misleading portrayal. She could believe that I “loved” her simply because she didn’t really know how to distinguish real love from the lust that was actually motivating me. I must reiterate that, along with her, I was also a victim to the persuasiveness of media influence and societal pressure. Believe in yourself, not in the lust of your flesh. You are worth so much more than that. Ask God about it; He’ll tell you and show you that much and more.

WHAT IS LOVE?

The fundamental difference between love and lust is that lust is self-centered, whereas love is other-centered. I want to share my thoughts on a familiar passage of the Bible that appears every year on Valentine's Day cards across the country. It is taken from 1 Corinthians 13:4 and reads: *"Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant."*

The fundamental difference between love and lust is that lust is self-centered, whereas love is other-centered.

Love is patient. Lust is impatient. Love has no problem waiting for sex because it is patient. A man who tells his girlfriend that he just can't wait to have sex, because he loves her so much, is lying. He can wait; he just doesn't want to place the well-being or wishes of his girlfriend above the gratification of his own cravings. Even if the sex is completely consensual, you have to ask questions such as these: Are

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those who jump hastily into bed really loving each other, or did their basic urges just happen to coincide? Would a friend take advantage of another friend's vulnerability? Can I trust what just happened to mean that we will be committed to each other for the rest of our lives? Will he or she respect me after this if I tell him or her I don't want to be intimate with him or her anymore?

Love is kind. Lust is unkind. Love considers the needs and desires of the other person first. It will go to any lengths to avoid unnecessarily hurting its partner. Lust will weigh its options and see what works in its own interest. It may appear to act kindly, but only to gain something in return. This unkindness and selfishness saturates the mindset of the individual motivated by lust. Do you want to be involved in a relationship where you are always wondering if he or she really loves you?

Many women are aware of the lustful intentions of a charming man who has a hidden agenda. Unfortunately, these same women will often go out with the guy anyway, allowing him to treat them as objects instead of giving them the respect that a woman truly deserves. How sad. By the same token, many women will use their sexuality to manipulate men, knowing that most men will do just about anything for sex. Flirtatious glances and suggestive words will easily have a lot of men buying them gifts or taking them to dinner in a heartbeat. This is also a demonstration of the unkindness

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that is characteristic of lust. The bottom line is, “I will use you to get what I want.” Is it really worth giving up your peace of mind, allowing her to manipulate you into getting her own way?

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Another trait of love is trustworthiness. Love doesn't envy; it isn't jealous of other friends or other things that attract the mate's attention. Love isn't threatened by anything in the loved one's past. On the other hand, lust, by its very nature, is extremely demanding. It will take and take and take until there is nothing left to be taken.

Love doesn't brag—not only about sexual exploits—but about itself in general. Think about the words used to refer to sex in settings such as locker rooms, barber shops, beauty salons, nightclubs, sporting events, sleepovers, and so on. We've all heard them. Ask yourself, do any of these phrases suggest love, intimacy, or caring for another person?

Remember, love's main concern is the wellbeing of the one who is the object of its love. The main concern of lust is the gratification of the one who is in lust. When applied to intercourse itself, it only makes sense

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that the couple who is focused on giving and pleasing each other will be more satisfied in the end, as opposed to the couple where one or both members only want to gratify themselves. There are many sexually frustrated men and women as a result of lust-based relationships. By the way, that incredible, simultaneous orgasm between two strangers passing in the night—happens far more often onscreen than off.

CAN LUST BE POSITIVE?

Having just referred to the Bible for a working description of love, I want to acknowledge that there are a large number of people out there who don't buy into the idea that lust is a negative thing. They don't consider lust as being a sin against God. Some see the pleasure gained from sex to be a legitimate end in itself; therefore any sex, if it is pleasurable, is good sex. I beg to differ.

Teenagers are particularly vulnerable to lust because of the aforementioned characteristics of impatience, pride, bragging, and so on. These traits are generally behaviors associated with emotional immaturity. Without understanding the important differences between love and simple desire, such immature behavior, coupled with physically maturing bodies, can be a recipe for disaster. When teenagers engage in premarital sex, their emotional growth can be severely damaged. Having established a behavioral

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pattern of shallow sex early in life, they often become adults who behave like shallow juveniles when it comes to intimate relationships.

Unfortunately, sexually active youth feel that they have discovered all there is to know about physical intimacy. As a result, they have inadvertently accepted that lust is as good as it gets. While few people will admit that one of their primary goals in life is the pursuit of meaningless pleasure, we are encouraged to find pleasurable escapes from the pressures of our contemporary existence.

Recall my previous example of entertainment media. Specifically, I am referring here to the kind of movie or program that associates a brief affair between two consenting adults, who happen to be “getting over” other relationships, with the need to get drunk or smoke a joint once in a while. This activity appears to be perfectly harmless for the characters involved, and no one gets hurt. Yet, it is extremely damaging for the young, impressionable minds of youth, who are open to any idea that would make them appear more “in the game.” This is simply because they don’t know any better and are trying to find their way through and make a place for themselves in this life.

As an aspiring actor/producer/director, I am not against the media dealing with reality, no matter how ugly it may sometimes be. What concerns me is that they are sending a misguided message and the real

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consequences of the behaviors portrayed are seldom shown. That fact leaves a sizeable portion of the population at a great disadvantage.

For instance, we see many movies celebrating teenagers as they discover their sexuality and develop interpersonal relationships. But we don't hear nearly enough about the teenage couple whose aspirations to attend college are thwarted by an unplanned pregnancy. I know of one such couple who began dating at age sixteen. The girl had a desire to become a doctor, and the guy wanted to become a chemical engineer. They shared their dreams of the colleges they wanted to attend. They even talked about their future and where they would live after receiving their respective degrees.

Unfortunately, as the relationship progressed, they decided to become sexually active, which led to the girl becoming pregnant. Although they both managed to graduate from high school, their college aspirations were never fulfilled. The boy went on to attend a local university and took a menial job in an effort to support the baby. Because of his work hours, he was often too tired to study and his grades suffered.

Furthermore, due to complications with the pregnancy, the girl's plans to begin college were delayed until the spring semester. After the baby was born, she was often late to class because she had to not only get herself ready in the morning but also take care of the baby's needs. There were other times when

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she couldn't get a babysitter and that prevented her from going to class at all.

Several years later, the young couple is still together. She is working as a cashier at a discount retail store, and he works at an auto parts store. This is a far cry from becoming the doctor and engineer they had hoped to be. It is regrettable that this story is true and there are so many others with similar details.

Whether it is the trauma of having an abortion, contracting a sexually transmitted disease, or the emotional damage incurred from sharing intimacy with a person whom you are not committed to for life, the consequences of premarital sex last long after the brief act of pleasure. With the rising epidemic of teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), we have to find a way to assist teenagers in their growing years. In most cases they are raising themselves, thereby making their own decisions to have sex—and in most cases they have their lives take a major turn from the direction it was supposed to go. Let's get involved. Become a volunteer at your local Boys and Girls Club of America or local church youth group, or some other church or school. It's time we make a difference in their lives so they can see that they do have a future.

Moreover, the irony that is rarely addressed in the media is that lust inevitably leads to loneliness and frustration. Acts of lust may temporarily soothe the

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pain or hurt that an individual is experiencing, but the ultimate result will be more pain. Why is this? Why is lust unable to meet our deepest needs? It is because we are more than just physical beings. We long for intimacy on a deeper level than the mere physical. If lust is our motivation and lust focuses on self, how can we ever be intimate with someone else? The bottom line is, we cannot focus on self alone without feeling the pain and suffering that is caused by emptiness and the lack of true companionship.

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WHAT IF WE REALLY LOVE EACH OTHER?

My argument is that lust is the motivation for having sex with someone to whom you are not married. We'll get into why this is the case in the next two chapters. For now, consider this simple fact: In any relationship, there are only two possible outcomes. You will either stay together forever in mar-

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riage, or you will break up at some point.

When I talk about sex at its best, I am referring to a deep intimacy that comes from the innermost part of your being. This type of intimacy is very often taken too lightly—even though it requires a level of vulnerability that you should not dare have with anyone who is not committed to you for life. To do so is to bring about sometimes very harsh consequences, and frankly it's rather delusional. Think about it—you are revealing your complete nakedness with another individual. In that moment, the way in which you look, smell, and express yourself both verbally and nonverbally is revealed. That is a tremendously personal, extremely intimate, and most sacred disclosure.

I can still recall how I became disgusted with the females with whom I shared intimacy. I lost respect for them because I had fulfilled my conquest. The thrill of the hunt was completed, and I did not want the responsibility of a committed relationship. I wanted the benefits without the responsibility or commitment. This is the mentality of many men today, both young and old. And now, sadly, many of our women have adopted the same attitude to protect themselves from getting hurt. And it doesn't work. Looking for love in all the wrong places will most assuredly have you walking away empty-handed. Everybody loses. Nobody wins. How sad.

Lack of commitment means lack of love. Even if you are already engaged, true love is patient, as we

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mentioned before. A person who genuinely loves you will be happy to wait until after your wedding ceremony. Too many couples get “engaged” without a ring or even a wedding date in order to convince themselves (and others) that they are truly committed to each other.

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In reality, if you aren't married, you will always be guessing about your partner's love for you. How risky. Most people's emotional issues regarding rejection and abandonment can be traced to a parent or another close individual who failed in the area of commitment. If this describes you, please understand that unconditional love (this is in regard to any relationship) is dedicating oneself to someone else for a lifetime. Even though it may seem scary, it is possible to achieve this status with God's help. Sometimes this requires a leap of faith. But if you believe that God

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was with you when you decided to allow this person into your heart, He will also remain with you after you have invited him or her to share your truest feelings.

When I made the decision to propose to my wife, I worked through much internal conflict and wondered whether she would respond favorably. She had stated that she valued our friendship and was open regarding marriage, but she wasn't sure. I knew that if I communicated with certainty and gave her a diamond ring, my actions would show her that I was serious about committing the rest of my life to her and thereby persuading her to respond.

I took the leap of faith based on my knowledge and the fact that what I felt in my heart toward her, I did not feel toward any other woman. It was something that wasn't driven by her physical beauty, her sweet voice, her love for God, or anything that she could do for me—all of which attract me to her. The love I felt for Terry was just because . . . I felt that there was nothing she could do to cause me to stop loving her. I knew it was unconditional. I knew it was love.

To conclude this discussion of love and lust, consider this illustration. A starving man eats out of a garbage can because he is hungry. He is aware of the fact that the container is filled with rotten food and disease. Despite the fact that rats and flies eat there too, out of necessity, he will search through the debris because it is the only thing close to food that he can find.

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When people are driven by necessity, they will eat garbage in the absence of healthy food. In a similar way, some people will settle for lust in the absence of real love because they are doing so out of a deep need. Just like garbage, when people partake of lust, it brings a lot of unwanted danger and disease along with it.

But here's the difference. Lust has a dangerous tendency to cloud our ability to make good decisions. In this case, the reality is that we have a clear choice and the consequences of lust far outweigh any short-term pleasure gained.

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