

In 1863, in his essay, “Winter Notes on Summer Impressions” Dostoevsky observed: “Try to pose for yourself this task: not to think of a polar bear; and you will see that the cursed thing will come to mind every minute.”

About 100 years later, psychology professor Daniel Wegner, so intrigued by this quote, ran a series of experiments. The instruction he gave to willing participants was simple: Talk for five minutes straight, about anything at all, and while you’re doing that, try not to think of a white bear. Okay? Well, the result of each study was always the same. The more that people tried to suppress thoughts of white bears, the more they actually thought of them. In fact, in a second round of testing, when compared to a different group of participants who were told that they *could* think of white bears, the original volunteers still ended up conjuring them with greater frequency; suggesting, that attempting to quarantine oneself from a thought, ironically, may cause that thought to “rebound” more prominently later on. Wegner labeled this effect “ironic rebound,” and noted that it appeared strongest when people were stressed out, tired, or distracted.<sup>1</sup>

Well, I don’t know about you. But over the last several weeks, I’ve been pretty stressed out, tired, and distracted. My wife and I try our best each night to spend quality time with each other. We literally say, “okay, no politics tonight!” And after a full day at work, and several hours in the evening with an 11-month old, you would think all we’d want to do is collapse into each other’s loving arms. But somehow, without fail, we find each other, not in each other’s arms, but huddled away in the corners of our house by an outlet somewhere folded over into our smartphones. Both swiping away. Not on Instagram, or some other banal application, but on Allsides.com, CNN, and even Fox News. Anywhere we can get our fix – not to feel better of course, but to feel worse, all in the name of staying informed. “My desire to be well-informed is currently at odds with my desire to remain sane;” The New Yorker’s David Sipes has famously opined. And how true that is! And yet, no matter how true we know it to be, we nonetheless persist in our masochistic endeavors. It has become our white bear. Each night that we attempt to suppress it, is also the night we seem most consumed by it. Honest to God, just last week, after promising we would leave it alone, I ended up concealing my smartphone on the other side of the popcorn bowl during an episode of Rectify(great show), swiping every time I reached for a kernel so to go undetected. It’s a sickness. It really is.

But this is not a new plague, arriving coincidentally with the advent of the iPhone. No, it’s been an affliction witnessed throughout time. For even in our holy texts, there is this same rhythm played out over and again. God decrees something, tells the people not to do something, and then like a chapter later they are doing just that. We see it all the time. Don’t erect an altar to a pagan god. They erect an altar to a pagan god. Don’t blaspheme against God’s name. They blaspheme against God’s name. It’s as if in the algorithm of Creation, God coded an ironic joke. And just maybe, framed in this particular context, we can laugh along with God. But truthfully, more often than not, it’s no laughing matter at all. For too often, we are the living antithesis of God’s Word.

For instance – and I’m just going to go there, because I don’t think we’ve ever dared go there before – perhaps like many of you, when I was younger, I wrestled mightily with lust. I also struggled with name-calling (my friends at one point addressed me as Dr. House), but since that’s a bit less provocative, let’s for today, on Valentine’s Day weekend, stick with lust. Now who’s suddenly feeling uncomfortable?

Lust is defined simply as a “very strong sexual desire.” Which, by that definition alone, renders it as a biologically, normal response, especially when expressed in a loving, committed relationship. But as a young, conservative, Christian teenager who was more or less persuaded to suppress lustful impulses at all times and in all situations, I was naturally overcome with them. God’s honest truth, I can remember these images flooding into my mind, and then spending the next several minutes furiously trying to bury them. And you know what? Like all things we try to bury, that aren’t first properly addressed, it only intensified the reaction the next time it came around. Instead of dating, and attempting to experience appropriate forms of intimacy like a healthy individual, I often cowered away, afraid that having a girlfriend might actually lead to some sort of physicality, terrified that I’d be unable to manufacture a “no” in a particular moment of peak intensity. And so there in the shadows, with my white bear, I quarantined myself. And looking back, it wasn’t at all healthy, even though at the time I had convinced myself that I was on the noblest pursuit of piety.

Now, am I implying today that it would actually be a *bad* thing to suppress one’s lustful temptations? That, perhaps, it might actually be advantageous, in some way, to frolic in the sensation rather than to tame it? Well, no, probably not, for though I am not a puritan, I am also not an outright hedonist. And so I think there needs to be some sort of middle ground; a common sense argument for a healthy moderation of sorts. But just as we begin to comfortably rationalize it away, there’s Jesus whispering in our ears: “But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Yikes. *Adultery*, Jesus?? Surely not! As several, even in our aged Bible Study class on Wednesday observed and smirked, we have all been caught with a wandering eye from time-to-time, but surely that glance is not the equivalent of actually snap-chatting for a midnight call! ...Now you’re right, they might not have actually used the term snap-chat, but you get the point.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.apa.org/monitor/2011/10/unwanted-thoughts.aspx>; and, <http://ndoherty.com/white-bear/>

So how then are we to reconcile Jesus' rather radical teaching on lust? I think maybe if we were to add a couple of sub-definitions, it might help us better understand his point. 1) Outside of a committed relationship, lust is imagining yourself, uninvited, into someone else's autonomous narrative. 2) Lust is conjuring yourself and your other into a place and a position, where you were not invited; and picturing for yourself an alternative reality where someone's essence is subjected to your dominance. 3) Lust can sometimes manifest because you're simply too cowardly to ask (and wait) for an answer of either "yes, yes" or "no, no" and thus, lust, can be, both degrading and disenfranchising, and thereby, morally wrong.

The note in one of my Biblical commentaries argues that "Jesus is reinterpreting the Decalogue's prohibition of adultery (Exodus 20:14), and reimagining it to condemn the predatory behaviors and structures of a patriarchal society, so to curb male power, and to establish a different male-female interaction." Personally, I find this explanation to be most helpful. Because as opposed to drawing a direct correlation between lust and adultery, which most of us, perhaps rightly, bristle at, Jesus is instead attempting to shock his followers into embracing a paradigm shift, where expressions of intimacy, if they are to be in any way dignified, must first, and always, require an invitation and a commitment.

Well, why would Jesus not just say that, you ask? Why rely on commentaries to fill in the gaps? Good question. And honestly, I think that if Jesus envisioned that an age would come where hungry eyes weren't just found on street corners, but also behind keyboards and computer screens, he might not have so drastically condemned this rather safe, by comparison, white bear of imagination. For in our day and age, **watching** pornography (and I mean Pornography, not scenes with European romance or suggestive visual art<sup>2</sup> -- the latter does not constitute "50 Shades Darker" or any such garbage), is just so much more damaging than merely **imagining** a possible encounter. At least, in my estimation.

In fact, this more subversive manifestation of lust is probably what prescient Jesus had in his mind when equating it with adultery. For not only does watching porn directly support a Multi-Billion Dollar Industry, where young girls are often trafficked and abused, but it also bleeds over into how we perceive, and what we expect from our other, even in a committed relationship. Pornography then is not symmetrical with our white bear example. For it exists outside the realm of pure thought, and instead belongs to the senses. And as puritanical as all this might translate, and as difficult as it might be for some of us to adhere to, I believe that all forays into pornography are best to be suppressed. Especially by those who claim to be God-loving people.

By way of Molly Day on Facebook, there was an article I read this week on [fightthenewdrug.org](http://fightthenewdrug.org) called: "Sex Before Kissing: How 15-Year Old Girls are Dealing with Porn-Addicted Boys." It is most alarming. It details how pornography is absolutely killing any notion of love in intimacy, and how it is destroying the very fabric of what a relationship between two equal persons should look like. It also goes into grim depth about what girls, even as young as Jr. High-aged, are facing rather continuously: sexual bullying, harassing, and shaming. It is sadly a must read for parents, as well as for everyone in these pews because, in truth, is not just a youthful issue.

But rather than delve into the salacious details so outlined in the article, let me use this pulpit to plainly say this (which in many ways is the article's point, and also Jesus' point): girls, you deserve better. And don't ever doubt it. You are not a "piece of ass." You command respect and deserve affirming expressions of love. You are beautiful, and no matter what boys or advertisements try to sell you, it's what's in here (heart), and here (brain), that counts. For in the end, the rest only gives way to gravity anyway.<sup>3</sup> So please, do not believe that the only way you can attract a boy's attention is by submitting to their lust, answering requests for certain pictures and doing certain actions. You are better than that. You deserve better than that. You are more attractive than all of that.

And boys: a girl is not a "piece of ass." The day that you start treating them like they are, is the day you've forfeited any pretense of you being a decent human being. And no, there is no such acceptable thing as it all only being "locker-room talk." No, that is just a sad excuse for ugliness. And yes, I am not so daft to think that these stereotypes always hold, in that boys are always the predators and girls the prey, but you all would benefit... strike that... we would all benefit, no matter our anatomy or persuasion, age or orientation, to start dignifying intimacy, and the ways in which we look at and treat one another.

For in the beginning and the end, we are all God's servants. Equally worthy of respect and equally deserving of honor. For within each of us, there, God abides. And so when we oppress a stranger, or objectify a neighbor, we also oppress and objectify God.

May none of us here ever forget that, no matter how often we are persuaded to suppress it.

...Though, I suppose, even if we did try to suppress it, God would one day bear down on us anyway.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> The differences here are too many and nuanced to get into for this particular sermon, but are nonetheless worthy of lengthier investigation and discussion.

<sup>3</sup> Thom Yorke, of Radiohead, sings as much ("gravity always wins") on the song *Fake Plastic Trees*. Go home and listen to it, and the rest of their catalogue.