

# The Opposite of Sex

Good morning everybody. If you have a bible, turn with me to **Matthew 5**. We're going to stop by another passage first before we get there, but we will get there eventually. If you're new, we as a church are in a series walking through the book of Matthew, that teaches us about the life, ministry and teachings of Jesus. And right now, we find ourselves in the middle of an extended teaching of Jesus where he unpacks what life can and should look like for us as his followers.

And up for discussion today are **the topic of sex**. So once again, if you're new, *welcome* to City Church. A very light, whimsical, non-controversial discussion ahead of us this morning. Now I know every time a topic like sex gets brought up church context, it probably makes some people a bit nervous. And there's probably a couple reasons for that. *One* is that the bible's perspective on sex isn't exactly the most popular perspective on it all.

But some of it is *also* probably that **churches haven't always done the best job discussing this topic**. Often, we have been guilty of putting forward what comes off as a pretty *negative* view of sex entirely. We end up giving the impression that Jesus' primary instructions on sex basically amount to the word "stop." Stop *having* sex. Stop *thinking* about sex. Stop thinking about having sex. I think that's the vibe that a lot of people get from how the Church sometimes talks about sex. And if we could just be *honest* for a moment, **what Jesus says** in our passage today can certainly **come across that way**. Because on the surface, it seems like he just threatened some combination of *hell* and *amputation* in return for sexual sin. At first read, that comes across as pretty intense.

*But* **to understand what Jesus says** here and *why* he says what he does, we need to understand the *framework* for sex that he is operating out of. And once we do that, his instructions here start to make a little more sense. And not only do they start to make more sense, they become obvious and necessary if we want to experience everything that sex and love were meant to be in the first place. So that's what I want us to do *first*. That *framework* comes from **Genesis 2, v. 24**, where it says this, speaking specifically about marriage (**we'll put this on the screen for you**):

*Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.*

So that verse right there is absolutely **ground zero** when it comes to a biblical understanding of marriage and sex. Jesus and other New Testament authors will circle back to *this passage* time and time again whenever they want to discuss those topics. Because in it, we find out what marriage *is*, and therefore what sex is by association: it is becoming “one flesh” with another person. That phrase in Hebrew describes when two human beings, through marriage, become inseparably *one* in every way possible: physically, emotionally, relationally, spiritually, sexually. One Hebrew scholar describes *one flesh* as two human beings becoming “fused together at the deepest level of their humanity.” So *biblically* speaking, marriage is not just some sort of formal legal arrangement in which two people agree to file their taxes together and share a last name. Far from it. It’s when two people merge and unite their lives together as one.

~~So people always think I’m joking when I say this, but the lyrics to John Legend’s song *All of Me* a few years back actually do a pretty good job describing it. He talks about how all of him belongs to all of his wife. How they are giving their all—their everything—to each other. And when that song came out, a lot of us were *in our feelings* about that song—we were all about it. And I think part of the reason for that is because it taps into the *reality* of what God made marriage, and therefore sex, to be. That, and John Legend’s silky smooth vocals. So I don’t know anything about his faith or his marriage, but I do know those words themselves are actually a pretty decent reflection of what marriage was meant to be in the Scriptures. It was meant to be a husband and a wife, giving every part of themselves to each other, with nothing held back.~~

And **if that’s what marriage is** in the bible, then **sex** is a *physical representation* of that. Sex is doing with your *body* what is true of the rest of your relationship. It’s giving yourself completely to another person with *nothing held back*. And that is why the Scriptures *teach* that sex belongs *exclusively* in the context of a marriage relationship. Because *otherwise*, you are communicating something with your *body* that is decidedly *not true* of the rest of the relationship.

You’re **saying physically, all of me is yours** with nothing held back. But in *reality*, there’s actually a *good bit of me* I’m holding back. You are functionally saying “I love you enough to do *this* with you, but not *more* than this. And even when it comes to who I do *this* with, I like it with you, but I would really prefer to keep my options open in case I would rather do it with someone else in the future.” We can try to be coy about all of that, but that is in essence what we’re communicating when we take the sexual

relationship outside of a marriage context: **we're communicating something with our bodies that isn't true of our lives.** And the bible just views that as a very *dishonest*, very *disjointed* way to go about a romantic relationship with someone.

And that brings us back to what **Jesus** says in **Matthew 5**. **The reason Jesus' warnings read so aggressive in this passage is because in them, he's not actually talking about sex. He's talking about the opposite of sex.** What Jesus warns against in this passage in Matthew 5 is *not* the sexual intimacy we read about in Genesis 2 at all—in fact, it's the antithesis of it. The thing Jesus talks about here, at its *core*, actually undermines and undercuts everything sex is about. And **because Jesus and the bible are pro-sex, they are anti-anything that destroys and undermines sex.** And a lot of that can be summed up in what Jesus calls “lust.”

So let's take a **look at Matthew 5** to see what that is exactly. Take a look with me, starting in v. 27 of our passage:

[27] “*You have heard that it was said* (meaning, in the Old Testament, it says...), *'You shall not commit adultery.'*”

**Adultery**, most *strictly*, refers to a *married person* engaging in sexual activity with anyone they're *not married to*. But we know from *elsewhere* in the bible that the same logic applies to a *single* person, since *any* sexual activity *they* participate in would be outside of marriage. So the Old Testament law prohibits all of that. But *next* Jesus is going to show us the intention *behind* that command. Continue with me in v. 28—

[28] *But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman* (or, we could infer, at a man) *with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his their heart.*

So apparently, the purpose of this Old Testament command **wasn't just to prohibit** sexual activity with someone you're not married to. It *was* also to point people *away* from *lust*: looking at another person in order to *lust after* them. The word “lust” in the bible refers to **any strong, overpowering desire for something that isn't yours.** To use another bible word, it is in essence, to *covet*: “to *want* something that doesn't *belong* to you.”

**Everywhere else in the New Testament**, this word *lust* is actually used to describe the desire for a *thing*—not a *person*. And I think that's telling. Because **lust is when you take another human being, and you turn them into an object.** When you make them

simply a means by which to satisfy *your* desires or fantasy. It's when you functionally strip the humanity from another person and view them simply as someone who can supply something that you happen to *want*.

Now the **primary thing Jesus has in mind** here is obviously objectifying people *sexually*: gazing at a person you're not married to because you are *physically attracted* to them. But that said, I don't think lust is always *sexual* in nature. **Lust is also when you spend time comparing and contrasting your spouse to other people.** It's when you entertain thoughts in your mind about how much better your life might be if you were married to a different person, or a different *type* of person. It's when you dwell on how much more *fun* or *thoughtful* or *romantic* that *other person* is, than *your spouse* is. If you're single, it's when you envision marriage as primarily a *thing* to make *you* happy, rather than primarily another person to unite your life *to*. All of that is *also* lust, even if it *isn't* sexual in nature. Because whether you realize it or not, you are still objectifying another person, you are still using them as a means to an end. That too is "heart adultery."

**But to be sure**, Jesus is talking *primarily* about *sexual objectification*. He's talking about the decision to take a person with a story and a soul and a past and a future and needs *themselves*—and boil them down to a collection of body parts that you enjoy looking at, fantasizing about, or using for your own enjoyment. **So just to make sure we're all clear here: to state the obvious, lust is viewing any type of pornography.** If it is sin to "look at a person in order to lust after them," porn has made that sin into an international pastime. So looking at *porn* is *lust*. But lust is also clicking over to that **Explore tab** on Instagram and pausing a little longer on all the posts with physically attractive men or women in them, maybe even giving them a "like" to let them know you're looking. It's when you see **that person out for a run** or at the gym with very few or very tight-*fitting* clothes on, and you choose to take that second or third or *seventh* glance back at them. Lust is fantasy, it's hypersexualized movies and TV shows. We could go on, but **lust is anytime that we turn another person into the object of our gaze, fantasy, or pleasure.**

Now here's **why I say** that all of that is the **"opposite" of sex**—this is *so important* for us to understand. Remember, sex, according to the bible, is *giving* all of yourself to another person with nothing held back. And **if that's what sex is, lust truly could not be further from that. It has the exact opposite intention.** *Lust is taking* from another person, while holding *all* of yourself back. Sex by its very nature *gives*, while lust *takes*. Sex is *sacrificial*, lust is *consumeristic*. Sex *humanizes* the other person, lust *objectifies* the other person. **In nearly every measurable way, lust is the polar opposite of sex.**

And that is why Jesus here can be *against lust*, but *for sex*. Because lust and sex are not the same thing—they're opposites. Does that make sense?

Now all that said, here's our problem: **there are few things more deeply integrated into our modern society than lust**. I'm not exaggerating when I say that lust is nearly *everywhere we look*. You can't go through the check-out line at the **grocery store** without being confronted with what amounts to soft porn on magazine covers, plastered with headlines like "make every man drool over you with these 17 make-up tips." This stuff is *everywhere*.

It's now college football season—praise the sweet Lord—so I've been watching a good bit more TV on Saturdays than I normally do. So I've been noticing in the commercials that come on is that we now use **lust to sell pretty much any product**. You'll see a commercial that is 28 seconds of a **man with a six pack** and no shirt on from different angles, and then at the very end it'll say *Gio: fragrance for men*. And it leaves you going, "wait—does the cologne *create* the six pack? Because I'm not really a cologne kind of guy but if it's *that easy*, I'll give it a shot!" Or you have the commercial with a man and a woman in what appears to be the **early stages of foreplay**—can I say foreplay in church? I just did, I guess. But it's them making out for the whole commercial, and then at the end it says "the new **Lexus RX350**." And you're like, "was there even a Lexus *in* that commercial?"

Lust is *everywhere* in our society. It's almost like **we don't know how to** hold people's attention, sell products, or function much at all *without* it. **We are being *disciplined* in hundreds of different ways, whether we realize it or not, each and every day, to objectify other people as a normal way of life.**

Now **to all of that, some people might say**, "what's the big deal?" Right? "Sex is a natural, human, healthy desire. What's the harm in enjoying how other people look? Is that really that big of a deal?" Well I'll just give you the data and let you draw your own conclusion. Here is what we know, so far, about lust. First, lust **destroys intimacy**: studies are now showing that the more porn a person watches, the more crushingly unrealistic expectations they have of sex with an actual person, and the less *tolerance* they have for the messiness of a real marital or sexual relationship.<sup>1</sup> Lust also **fuels sexual violence**: there are over 50 studies out there that directly link porn consumption to acts of sexual assault.<sup>2</sup> Lust is actually **decreasing the frequency of sex** itself: sociologists are

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<sup>1</sup> From Regnerus and Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America*. Available [here](#).

<sup>2</sup> From Foubert's "fact sheet," found [here](#).

discovering that the further we get into the “Sexual Revolution,” the less sex people are actually having.<sup>3</sup>

Lust **contributes** to widespread problems with **body image issues**: the more our society idolizes men and women that meet our near-impossible cultural standards of beauty, the more the other 99.9% of us struggle to see our own bodies as beautiful and adequate. Lust is having a profound **negative impact on children**: the most recent data I could find shows that children are having their first encounter with porn when they are *ten* years old. That’s *elementary* school. Some *high schools* are considering adding “porn literacy” classes to their curriculums because students are entering into sexual relationships thinking that the porn they watch depicts realistic sexual relationships (and it doesn’t).<sup>4</sup> We’re having to teach our high schoolers not to follow the cues they see in porn so that rates of sexual assault and violent sex acts don’t skyrocket. Those are just a handful of the negative effects lust is having, right now, on our society. I could go on.

But Jesus gives one more negative effect of lust right here in the passage: that lust often **motivates divorce**. In the passage, it may seem like Jesus is moving onto a new topic, but in reality he is just showing how the same problem plays out in a different arena: the arena of divorce.

Now, before we get into this, I *do* want to give an important disclaimer. I know that divorce is a very personal and emotional topic for a lot of people. And *because* of that, I want to acknowledge that I am not even going to *attempt* to unpack everything there is to unpack about divorce and remarriage in the bible. That wouldn’t be possible or even helpful as a fly-by sort of conversation. Plus, I **don’t think that’s actually what Jesus is trying to do** in this passage. In many ways, that’s what he does in Matthew chapter 19. So when we get to that passage in our series, we will discuss the topic of divorce in far more detail—so you have *that* to look forward to.

But **all I think Jesus is doing here** is carrying out everything he’s already discussed and discussing another way it shows up. So **he’s not so much discussing all divorce, as he is discussing one particular type of divorce**. So let’s **read the two verses**, and then we’ll unpack the situation together. Let’s skip ahead to v. 31-32, and then we’ll come back to v. 29-30. Verses 31 & 32 say this:

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<sup>3</sup> Read more on this [here](#).

<sup>4</sup> *What Teenagers are Learning From Online Porn*, New York Times, 2018.

[31] “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a *certificate of divorce*.’ [32] But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, *makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery*.”

So here’s **what was going on**. In this day and age, **it was widely known and understood that adultery was off limits for God’s people**. Most Israelites were *crystal clear* on that much. But people back then did what people have *always* done, which is that they looked for ways *around* crystal clear instructions. So there was at least one group of people at the time that went “okay—I can’t sleep with a person who’s not my spouse—got it. But if I *divorce* my spouse, and marry the person I *want* to sleep with—then I’m good to go, right? Because *then* it’s not adultery anymore.” That’s what some people were doing.

And it didn’t *help* that those **people had misinterpreted a passage** from the Old Testament *about* divorce—the one Jesus references here. There, it said “*if* a man divorced his wife, he had to give her a *certificate* of divorce.”<sup>5</sup> So some people took *that* to mean that as long as they went about divorce in a legal way, God was totally cool with it. Now like I said, that was a terrible *misreading* of that Old Testament passage, but it was a very *popular* misreading of it, and therefore a pretty common practice at the time. So primarily *men* would just go get a divorce and get remarried in order to try and make their adultery morally and spiritually *acceptable*. Not all that different from what a lot of people do *today*, actually.

And **to that practice**, Jesus comes along and says “absolutely not. You can’t just go get a divorce because you want to be with somebody else.” That’s the exact same *posture* as someone who looks at a woman he’s not married to, in order to lust after her.” You’re still *objectifying* other people. You’re still using them as a means to your own personal ends. If anything, you’re now objectifying *two different* people: the person you wanted to be with, *and also* your spouse that you’re just *casting aside* because they no longer meet your perceived needs. That’s the *exact same* heart posture as adultery, and it’s not *better*—it’s *worse*.

So in the passage Jesus says **anyone who does that is 1) still** guilty of adultery from God’s perspective, and 2) is also now *morally responsible* for making their *divorced spouse* an adulterer too (assuming that that spouse remarries). Does that all make

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<sup>5</sup> This is found in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which Jesus clarifies the true meaning of in Matthew 19:1-12.

sense? So Jesus' point is that **at least some divorces are just one more casualty of lust: the practice of objectifying other people, using them to satisfy our needs, and casting them aside when they no longer do.** Many of you are likely *victims* of this kind of divorce: you were either the spouse that was cast aside, or one of your parents was, or one of your friends was and then you had to “pick sides,” or whatever the scenario was. So you know first-hand how harmful and destructive it can be. Some divorces are just one more example of how lust harms people in our world.

So listen—here's my point. As a society, **we can keep playing this game** where we pretend that lust is fun and exciting and harmless and natural. Where we tell jokes about it and write plotlines to TV shows out of it. Where we use it to sell products and magazines. But the reality—the data, sitting right in front of us—tells us quite a different story. It sure sounds to me like **lust is having far more of a negative impact on our world than most people are ready to admit.** And here's why lust is harmful: because lust trains us to see other human beings as objects. It trains us to ignore the image of God in other people and use them for our own happiness, enjoyment, and pleasure. And as Marcus mentioned last Sunday, **any time we ignore the image of God in another person, harm and destruction always follows.**

And **that is precisely why Jesus instructs us** to do **whatever it takes** to root out lust from our hearts. Which brings us back around to v. 29-30. Look back with me at those two verses.

*[29] If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. [30] And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.*

So first: it's worth noting that Jesus is **not being literal** here. Just felt like I should mention that before you get out the scalpel or the saw. Jesus isn't seriously advocating for *amputation* and *disfigurement* as a strategy against lust. If for no other reason than—and follow me here—if *he thought men specifically* should cut off body parts to fight against lust, he sort of omitted the most obvious choice. So I don't think these instructions are meant to be taken literally. Jesus is simply using *hyperbole* here to get his point across.

But that's **anything but a cop-out**. Because if Jesus is willing to use such *extreme* language to grab people's attention, that should tell us something about how **serious** he

thinks this stuff is. You don't incorporate something like *amputation* into a teaching for no reason. Jesus wants to be clear that **in the fight against lust, we need to be willing to take drastic, even extreme, measures.** If sexual sin is *this* destructive, we need to take a "no holds barred" approach in our efforts to shake its grip on our lives. So let me just try and give you some ideas of the types of things this might include for us.

So maybe it looks like **making certain shows or movies off-limits** for you. If you are easily given towards lust, there are going to be some things you just have **no business watching.** And I'll add—it's not **just the ones** that show a lot of **skin.** It also might be the shows where every **plotline** makes light of sex and encourages the objectification of other people. There are plenty of shows out there that show very little skin, but are still *disciplining* you to think a certain way about sex that is unhealthy.

Or maybe it's **pursuing accountability on your devices.** For most of us, our phones, tablets and computers are the **access point** when it comes to porn, certain apps, or just an unhelpful use of social media. Because of that, I know of men and women that have installed either accountability software on their devices, or just activated restrictions on them and had their spouse, friend, or roommate set the password. Maybe that's what you need to do. I know men specifically, right now, that are rockin' an old school flip phone because they want to be serious about the fight against lust. Maybe you need to think on some of that.

Or maybe it's **using discretion about dating apps.** I realize at this point it's probably **unrealistic to think** that nobody in our church will be on dating apps. But with that being said, please be aware of what they are teaching you to believe about sex and about other people. Some of them—not all of them, but *some*—whether you realize it or not, are literally training you to **shop for people** by objectifying them based on their appearance. And if you don't think that is having an effect on how you think about yourself, about other people, and about sex—I think you're being naive. So if you're single and use dating apps, practice asking yourself "is this encouraging me to see other people as holistic, complete human beings—or is it encouraging me to objectify other people?"

Lastly, I'll be honest with you, the **first and most important way** to "cut off your hand" if lust is present in your life, is to **tell someone.** The thing about sexual sin is that it *thrives*—and I mean *thrives*—in the dark. The longer you struggle with it without anybody knowing, the more permanent and sometimes, the *darker*, it will become. So **if you want to get serious about the fight against lust, one of the most fruitful things you can do is tell somebody about it, today.** Sin begins to starve when you bring it into the

light. Be completely honest about it. Don't say "I struggle with lust"—say "I struggle with lust and here's what it looks like. It's *this* TV show, it's *this* access point to porn, it's *this* social media network or *this* dating app. And I need your help fighting its presence in my life." If you don't know where to start, start there. *Tell* someone about it and ask for their help.

So hopefully, all of those give you **some ideas**. And I'm sure there are a lot more where those came from—hopefully you can get into all of that as we discuss this teaching in our LifeGroups. But at the end of it all, here's the objective: *do whatever it takes to fight the presence of lust in your heart*. Even if it's complicated, even if it's unideal, even if it's inconvenient—do it anyway. That's kind of Jesus' *point*. It's pretty inconvenient to not have a hand. Pretty unideal to not have an eye. But his point is that **sex is important enough, and lust is destructive enough, that it is more than worth some inconveniences in your life.**

So as we approach the end of the teaching, I'll just tell you this. **As a pastor, it is so difficult to teach on sex and sexual sin.** One just because of how *heavy* it is (**and I have to do this twice today!**). But more specifically, it's difficult because when it comes to sexual sin and shame, there are really **two different messages** people need to hear, depending on where they're at. **One is the message Jesus gave us today:** *cut off your hand. Gouge out your eye. Do whatever it takes to fight sexual sin in your life!* Some of us have gone too far and too long treating sexual sin in our life like it's not really that big of a deal. And because of that, it is wreaking havoc on our lives, whether we want to admit it or not. So the message *some* of us need to hear is "wake up and let's get to work." Sex is far too important, far too powerful to approach *flippantly* and *carelessly*. That's one message.

But **the other message** that I know a lot of us need to hear is this, and I want you to look at me when I say this: **God's affections for you are not dependent on how successfully you rid sexual sin from your life.** They're not—that's not how God operates. Some of you have been effectively "cutting off your hand" for *years of your life*. You've been going to extreme measures for a long, *long* time to fight against sexual sin. You've been taking it as seriously as you know how, and it just feels like it won't go away. It feels like no matter what you do, you can't fight that lingering glance. You can't shake that porn habit. You can't control the places that your heart wonders in certain moments. And because of that, some of us are just *wrecked* by feelings of shame and failure over that sexual sin in our life. And there is no shame quite like sexual shame.

I'll tell you a little about **my story**. The **first time I saw porn**, I was in middle school. A friend of mine came over to the house and said, "you've gotta see this website," and before I could say anything, he had pulled it up on the browser. And what I didn't know in that moment was that seeing that website, whatever it was, would eventually kickstart a multi-year *addiction* to porn. For some of middle school, *most* of high school, and into my first couple years of college, porn was a *regular* part of my life. And I still remember, my junior year of college, meeting Jesus and thinking "oh this should fix my porn problem—since he's not cool with it and all." And you may be shocked to find out that becoming a Christian does not in fact instantly fix a porn problem.

And so I went through **years of being prayed with**, and prayed over. Asking for healing from it and having *others* ask for healing on my behalf. And I would love to say that there was this big moment where someone prayed over me, and I just experienced immediate, total freedom from it—that happens for some people. But it didn't happen that way for me. Instead, what it took and is taking is **years of "cutting off my hand."** Years of inconveniencing myself to pull out the roots of sin in my heart and mind.

And while I've **seen a ton of freedom** from porn at *this* point in my life, what I've also discovered is that the roots of porn go a lot *deeper* than porn. Years of using porn creates patterns in your heart and mind that don't just magically go away. It creates patterns of thinking about other people and about sex that don't just vanish. So while porn is not the main issue anymore, I am still regularly *plagued* by things and thought patterns in my mind that all those years of porn left behind.

And if I'm just completely honest, there are **moments where I just feel so beaten down** by the fight against it all. Moments where I feel so frustrated that it often feels like I'm doing everything I know how to do, and those thought patterns still remain. Those ways of thinking are still there. And because of that, there are a lot of moments where I still just feel like a colossal *failure* when it comes to the fight against lust in my own heart.

But it's in those very moments that I find hope in the words of **Romans 5. Romans 5, v. 8** says "*while we were yet sinners*, Christ died for us." *While we were sinners*. There's something I need all of us to hear today: Jesus did not die for the *future version* of you. He did not die for the new-and-improved you, the spiritually *impressive* you. He didn't die for the version of you that no longer struggles with things that are embarrassing to confess. It is so incredibly easy to believe that Jesus is *putting up* with us now, because one day we'll be something impressive. But not according to Romans 5. According to Romans 5, *while we were yet sinners*, Christ died for us. Every single one of your sins

were *future* sins when Jesus died. Which means no sin is too big, no sinful life pattern is too difficult, no secret is too dark for the Spirit to bring healing *right into the middle of it*.

So **just in case some of you are, like me**, inclined to believe that God's love for you rises and falls based on your fight against lust—can we just today, once and for all, put that lie to rest? The beauty of the good news of Jesus is that his affections for us always and forever remain the same. He is not caught off-guard by what you're struggling with. He is not saying about you, "man—I really thought they would've kicked that porn habit by now. I really thought they'd be done *lust* and *comparison* by now." Jesus sees us, in the depths of our sin, in the depths of our fight against it—and says, "I love them *right now*. They are my son, my daughter, *right now*. In them I am well pleased, *right now*. Not once you get it together. Not once you stop struggling with this. *Right here and right now*." And starting from there, I will *love them into freedom* from their sin. That's who God is.

That's what the **cross and the resurrection** were all about. We're called to fight against lust, for sure—but God's affections for us are not based on how successfully the fight is. They're based on what has already been accomplished for us. And once you know *that*, if you're willing to fight, the shame of sexual sin doesn't stand a chance.

So here's what I'd love to do—I'd love to just pray a prayer of freedom over us...