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Another Look at Lust: A Christian View

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Joshua Harris’ approach is counter-cultural from the start. Most Americans reject the very notion that there are any pleasures that we are not “meant to have.” Our society has institutionalized lust, weaving the patterns of illicit sexual desire throughout the culture’s interplay of media, entertainment, status, and advertising. Lust is now part and parcel of the modern vision of the good life.

Harris argues that “lust may be the defining struggle for this generation.” Previous generations faced the moral challenges of war, poverty, and pestilence, but this generation is absorbed in a continual cycle of lust and sexual gratification.

A best-selling author, Harris is known to many young Christians through his works on biblical courtship and marriage. In *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* and *Boy Meets Girl*, he helped to educate a generation of evangelicals about the biblical notion of courtship as preparation for marriage.

Senior Pastor of Covenant Life Church in Gaithersburg, Maryland, Harris combines pastoral experience with keen spiritual insight. In his earlier works, he focused on the dangers inherent in the conventional pattern of dating that has become the norm among young Americans. This system of one-on-one dating between young men and women is morally suspect because it places the couple in a context of premature sexual intimacy. The escalating rate of premarital sex among young Americans—including many who claim to be Christians—is sufficient evidence to give Harris’ arguments credence. Furthermore, he roots his argument in a more biblical vision of courtship as intentional preparation for marriage.

Why choose now to write on lust? “Writing two books on the topic of dating and courtship in the last five years has helped me to see just how serious this problem is for a broad spectrum of believers,” Harris explains. “I’ve received thousands of letters and e-mails from people of all ages around the world who are struggling with sexual impurity.” As Harris sees it, the problem is deadly serious. “The stories are heartbreaking and they’re from both women and men. They’re stories of small compromises that lead to serious sin and regret. They’re stories of secret and anguishing battles with premarital sex, with pornography, and with homosexuality. They’re stories from those who once swore to remain pure and now can’t believe the depths of impurity to which they’ve descended.” With lust now standing at the center of American culture, celebrated as a vital part of the good life, Harris sounds like an absolute extremist when it comes to the seriousness of lust. What is God’s standard when it comes to lust? How much lust is allowable in the Christian life? Harris’ answer is the essence of simplicity: “Nada. Zip. Zero.” Just in case you missed his point, Harris goes on to insist

that lust has no place at all in the Christian life—not even a hint.

Why such a high standard? “I’m not saying this to be dramatic,” Harris insists. “I really believe it’s what God calls each Christian to regardless of what kind of culture we live in or how old we are. And it’s not because God is heavy-handed, or strict for the sake of strictness. It’s because He loves us—and because we are His.” Joshua Harris is an honest man, and he brings that honesty to *Not Even A Hint*. He confesses his own struggle with lust as a young man, and allows readers—both male and female—to identify with the depth of his moral and spiritual struggle.

When addressing lust, defined as an illicit sexual desire, the chief difficulty we face is in defining the distinction between lust and a healthy sexual desire. Harris admits the difficulty, and he attempts to draw the distinction by insisting that lust is not being attracted to someone nor is it a sudden eruption of sexual temptation. The essence of lust is the enjoyment of the illicit desire, the pleasure of temptation prolonged.

Nevertheless, even innocent desire can turn into lust if given the slightest invitation. As Harris explains, “A sexual thought that pops into your mind isn’t necessarily lust, but it can quickly become lust if it’s entertained and dwelled on. An excitement for sex in marriage isn’t sin, but it can be tainted by lust if it’s not tempered with patience and restraint.” Clear enough?

The human sex drive is not the product of biological evolution or cosmic accident. Our Creator made us sexual beings and put a strong sex drive within us in order to drive us toward marriage and all the goods that are united in the marital union. As fallen creatures, we need the guiding assistance of the sex drive to pull us out of lethargy and self-centeredness into a fruitful and faithful relationship with a spouse. In making us male and female, God intended for men to be sexually attracted to women and for women to be sexually attracted to men, but this attraction is not merely a matter of mutuality between two genders, but is intended to direct us toward a mutuality of two persons, united in the covenant of marriage.

Within marriage, sexual pleasure and sexual passion are essential parts of the relational glue that holds the union together, points towards procreation, and establishes an intimacy described in the Bible as a one-flesh relationship. Joshua Harris understands this, and he affirms that “God gave us our drives so that we would drive toward something.”

So far, so good. The deadly problem of lust arises when the sex drive is directed toward something less than or other than the purity of marriage. As philosopher Simon Blackburn argues, lust is sexual passion and pleasure defined as an end in itself. Blackburn’s secular argument leads to an open embrace of lust as an act of self-definition. Harris’s Christian understanding leads him to see lust as a reminder of the believer’s need for self-denial. He understands the fact that we live in a pornographic age and in a society driven by lust. Given these realities, he proposes a “custom-tailored plan” for every individual. With the complex and immediately available seductions of pornography and sexual enticement, Harris understands that every individual is likely to be faced with a different pattern of temptation. As he acknowledges, “there can be no ‘one size fits all’ approach to combating lust.” That being the case, the Christian is required to be honest about the pattern of temptation he or she faces. Harris deals with lust as packaged and presented in books, the Internet, the mailbox, and the general context of every day life. He points to the need for accountability and ruthless honesty about lust and its consequences.

Having been there himself, Joshua also knows that the struggle against lust cannot be won by mere personal determination and the application of self-control. Furthermore, legalism is no antidote to lust. “We can’t save ourselves and we can’t change ourselves,” Joshua explains. “Only faith in Christ can rescue us from the prison of our sin. And only the Spirit can transform us. Our job is to invite His work, participate with it, and submit more and more of our thoughts, actions, and desires to Him.”

Not Even A Hint is a ground-breaking book of Christian candor and biblical honesty. Once again, Joshua Harris has given young Christians a great gift—a book that combines Scriptural wisdom with a sense of deep urgency. He writes with passion and credibility, and this author does not duck the hardest issues.

Simon Blackburn thinks that lust is a virtue, and many Christians fool themselves into thinking that lust is no real problem. Joshua Harris has offered an antidote to those tragic misperceptions. Lust is not only a vice, it is a sin that ignites yet other sins. *Not Even a Hint* is a sober-minded antidote to this sex-saturated age.

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