



sex is not
the problem
(lust is)

Sexual Purity in a Lust-Saturated World

joshua harris

Previously Released as *Not Even a Hint*

SEX IS NOT THE PROBLEM (LUST IS)

J O S H U A
H A R R I S



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*For my children,
Emma Grace
and
Joshua Quinn.*

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P r e f a c e

When I first told my father-in-law I was writing a book on lust, he humorously asked, “So are you for it or against it?” I laughed and told him that I’m against lust and that I think there’s already enough literature in favor of it! But later I realized that the message of this book is not that I’m against lust, but that I’m for God’s plan for sexual desire. Yes, lust is bad. But it’s bad because what it perverts is so good.

Some people have the mistaken notion that God is anti-sex. In fact, He’s outspokenly pro-sex! He invented it. What an incredible thought! Passionate sex was God’s idea.

He isn't embarrassed by it. Song of a Songs is an entire book in the Bible dedicated to celebrating pure sex in marriage.

Part of the challenge Christians face in a lust-filled world is remembering that neither sex nor sexuality is our enemy. Sex is not the problem—lust is the problem. It's the enemy and has hijacked sexuality. We need to keep reminding ourselves that our goal is to rescue our sexuality from lust so we can experience it the way God intended.

That being said, let me be the first to admit that I need this book as much as or more than anyone else who will ever read it. I wrote it not because I've "conquered" lust and have a foolproof plan for you to follow; I wrote it because I've experienced God's power to change, and I know He wants you to experience that power too.

Two years ago, I was preparing to give a message on lust when I realized that the book I wanted to consult hadn't been written. That book would make it clear that only Jesus Christ can free us from the hopeless treadmill of shame and guilt that so many well-intentioned people end up on. It would be a "PG-rated" book that would instill a love for holiness and a hatred for lust without dragging the reader's imagination through the gutter. And it would be for both men and women, because I've learned that lust isn't just a guy problem—it's a human problem.

This is my humble attempt to write that book. And though I'm now happily married, much of what you'll read is directed toward single men and women. That's because so often it's during the single years that lust gains a foothold in a person's life. But the principles in this book aren't limited to singles or to a certain age group. I hope many married people will read it and benefit too.

If you're a Christian, I want to remind you of truths you may have allowed to slip. If you're reading this and you're not a Christian, please don't let my religious terms scare you off. If you're frustrated by the way lust controls and shapes your life and are plagued by guilt, I want to introduce you to the Savior who has forgiven me and changed my life.

I've learned that I can only fight lust in the confidence of my total forgiveness before God because of Jesus' death for me. My guilt and shame, even self-inflicted punishment, can never cleanse me. Even my good works can't buy my forgiveness. I need a Savior. I need grace.

Author Jerry Bridges says it best: "Every day of our Christian experience should be a day of relating to God on the basis of His grace alone," he writes. "Your worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the reach of God's grace. And your best days are never so good that you are beyond the need of God's grace."

Whether you're having a "good day" or "bad day," my prayer is that something in this small book will introduce you to the life you really want—a life more pleasing to God, a life marked by deep inward purity, a life that knows both the pleasure and the freedom of holiness.

JOSHUA HARRIS

Part One

THE TRUTH
ABOUT LUST

Not Even a Hint

Why Can't I Seem to Beat Lust?

Seven of us were gathered in the dimly lit living room. A single sheet of notebook paper passed slowly between each person. Finally, it came to me. I scanned the numbered list then solemnly signed my name at the bottom of the page.

The “contract,” as we had come to call it, was a strict code of conduct, a list of promises that each of us was vowing to follow for the coming year.

We would read our Bibles every day.

Go to church every Sunday.

Memorize a passage of Scripture every week.

Fast every Tuesday.

Share our faith with one person each week.

We wouldn't watch any movies.

We wouldn't kiss a girl.

We wouldn't drink alcohol.

And we wouldn't masturbate.

Actually, I don't remember all the promises on the list. I think there were nearly fifteen. But I distinctly remember that the vow to refrain from masturbating was number ten on the list. That promise held the particular attention of each of us.

THE STALLIONS

I was eighteen years old. The other six guys ranged in age from seventeen to twenty-four. That summer we were working as counselors at a Christian leadership camp in Colorado. Carlos, Clint, and I washed dishes. Don, Brook, Jon, and Scot shuttled students in the vans. We called ourselves "The Stallions"—named after a cabin several of the guys lived in.

I can't remember exactly when the idea for the contract came up. I guess we wanted rules. We wanted to know we

were pleasing God. The whole process of becoming holy seemed complicated to us, so the idea of reducing our faith to a manageable list of promises and prohibitions was appealing.

So there we were in Jon's parents' living room signing our names. After we were done, Jon took the piece of paper, placed it on the floor in the center of the room, and knelt beside it. "C'mon, guys," he said. "Let's seal our vow with prayer."

The whole thing was very dramatic. All that was missing was a rising orchestral theme playing in the background. We got down on our knees, huddled in a circle, and extended our right hands onto the sheet of paper. We closed our eyes and bowed our heads, then pledged before God to obey every rule on the list.

It was official. The contract was ratified. I felt sure that the angels in heaven must be leaning down in amazement, watching our impressive display of godliness and the sheer strength of will in the room.

A few days later, we all left for home. I was still basking in the euphoria of our religious zeal. Every generation needs men of courage, men of conviction, men of strength—men of God. I was one of those men.

The illusion lasted about two weeks. That's when I broke rule number ten of the contract.

The year that followed was a very humbling lesson in how utterly incapable I was of being righteous in my own strength. And I wrote “number ten again” in my journal more times that year than I want to think about. All my great ambitions, all my vows, all my self-efforts were revealed to be worthless.

A DEFINING STRUGGLE

I can laugh now as I look back on that year under the tyranny of “the contract,” but it really taught me some important lessons about the limitations of human rules and regulations to bring about real change in a person’s life—especially in the area of lust.

Of course, masturbation is just one of the myriad ways that sexual lust manifests itself in our lives. Your struggle with lust might look quite different from mine. It could involve romantic fantasies, Internet pornography, or the temptation to get sexually involved with a boyfriend or girlfriend. Because the possibilities are endless, I have a simple definition for lust: Lust is craving sexually what God has forbidden.

To lust is to want what you don’t have and weren’t meant to have. Lust goes beyond attraction, an apprecia-

tion of beauty, or even a healthy desire for sex—it makes these desires more important than God. Lust wants to go outside God’s guidelines to find satisfaction.

I’ve come to believe that lust may be *the* defining struggle for this generation. Writing two books on the topic of dating and courtship in the last five years has helped me see just how serious this problem is for a broad spectrum of believers. I’ve received thousands of letters and e-mails from people of all ages around the world who are struggling with sexual impurity.

The stories are heartbreaking, and they’re from both women and men. They’re stories of small compromises that led 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.

One girl named Chelsea, who found herself trapped in a web of masturbation and Internet pornography, wrote me. Her letter is typical of the desperation and frustration of so many:

I don’t know who I am anymore. I am so scared....
I do what I know is wrong. I have tried to stop—
really, I have. I have cried and sobbed at night. I

have prayed and kept journals. I have read books. I am honestly at a loss. I love God, but I cannot continue to ask for forgiveness over and over and over for the same thing. I know I need help, but I don't know how to get it. I know that God has so much more planned for my life than this. But this sin continues to conquer me.

Can you relate to Chelsea's anguish? You try and try, but it never seems to be enough. Is there anything more discouraging than losing the fight against lust? It saps your spiritual passion. It makes your faith feel hollow. It stifles prayer. It colors your whole view of your walk with God. At moments you're so overwhelmed by shame that God seems a million miles away.

WHAT ARE WE DOING WRONG?

Is this how it's supposed to be? Did Jesus die to win *this* for us?

No, it's not. God doesn't want you to live in an endless cycle of defeat. Chelsea is right. Our heavenly Father *does* have so much more planned for us than a life dominated by lust, guilt, and shame. So why don't we experience it? What are we doing wrong?

In our losing battle against lust we're often misguided in three key areas. We've had...

- the wrong *standard* for holiness,
- the wrong *source* of power to change,
- and the wrong *motive* for fighting our sin.

My failure to uphold “the contract” was my first clue that my method for resisting lust was misguided. To begin with, it was based on my own standard of what it meant to obey God. I created a rule I thought I could follow—I wouldn't masturbate for a year.

The result was that I placed my hope in the wrong source of power to obey—my own willpower and strength. I wasn't putting my faith in God; I was putting my faith in Joshua Harris and his ability to resist temptation.

My motivation didn't help either. Though it wasn't completely wrong—part of me genuinely wanted to please God—a huge part of my motivation was to “feel” like a pure person. I wanted to be able to say I hadn't sinned. I wanted to show God how good I could be and how worthy I was.

But of course it all fell apart. After I sinned again, my motivation crumbled. I didn't feel pure or worthy of God's love. My guilt made me reluctant to pray. So I tried harder

to muster the willpower to stop lusting. This only led to more discouragement and frustration. Even when I revised my standards—“I won’t do it for the next *nine* months!”—the whole cycle repeated itself again.

Can you relate? Do you see how getting our standard, source of power, and motivation all wrong leads to ongoing failure?

I wrote this book because I’ve learned that I don’t have to live on this treadmill. You don’t have to either. God’s Word shows us how to get on the path to freedom. It shows us that the key to escaping the cycle of defeat is to embrace God’s standard for holiness, His source of power for change, and His motive for fighting sin.

DUELING STANDARDS

So what *is* God’s standard when it comes to lust? How much lust does God want us to allow in our lives?

Are you ready for this? The answer is *not even a hint*.

That’s right. Nada. Zip. Zero.

I’m not saying this to be dramatic. 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. It’s because

He is wise and His wisdom exceeds our understanding.
Ephesians 5:3 says:

But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people.

We'll learn more later about why God set His standard so high. But for now, it's enough to note that to acts of "sexual immorality" God adds "or any kind of impurity." It's not just the sins of adultery and sex outside of marriage God wants us to be freed from. He wants us to eliminate any kind of impurity in our thoughts and actions. He wants us to dig down into our hearts and uproot sexual greediness, which is always seeking a new sensual thrill.

But instead of that, a lot of us have developed a diet mentality toward lust. We really want to cut back on lust because we know it's not healthy and it makes us feel bad. But like some rich, calorie-laden chocolate dessert, lust is just too tasty to resist completely. Surely God will understand if we break our diet and nibble a little lust now and then (get too intimate on a date here, watch a questionable movie there, or indulge in an ungodly fantasy).

This is the same kind of thinking behind the age-old question asked in youth groups: "How far is too far?"

Isn't just a little lust okay? You can see how our diet mentality leads us to set up a lower standard than God's. You might call it "A little won't hurt." And, hey, it sounds like a reasonable standard. Best of all, at least on the surface, it seems doable!

There's just one problem: The Bible teaches the opposite. A little lust is not okay. That's why God calls us to the daunting standard of *not even a hint*. This means there's no place for lust to exist peacefully in our lives. We're to fight it on every front.

Sounds exhausting, doesn't it? But if you're feeling like the bar is set hopelessly high, don't give up. That's exactly what you should be feeling....

"BUT THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE!"

When I was deciding what to call this book, one person suggested *I Kissed Lust Goodbye*. My first book, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, had done well, he reasoned, and my new book would benefit from being tied to it. Besides, isn't that what we want to do—kiss lust goodbye?

Well, yes it is, but I didn't like the idea. It made it sound like ridding our lives of lust is an easy thing. As if it's something that everybody, if they're so inclined, can simply decide to do. But if you've tried to turn your back on lust,

you know this isn't so. Lust and impurity entice us, ensnare us, and dog us even after we've sworn them off for the thousandth time.

Sexual purity is clearly something only God can bring about in your life and mine. God's standard of *not even a hint* quickly brings me to the end of my own ability and effort. It reminds me that God's standard is so much higher than the standards I place for myself that only the victory of Christ's death and resurrection can provide the *right power* and the *right motive* needed to change me.

Willpower won't work. Only the power of the cross can break the power of sin that keeps us on its treadmill.

Despair or pride that I can change won't work either. Only the motive of grace—trust in the undeserved favor of God—can inspire us to pursue holiness free from fear and shame.

THE PROMISE OF PLEASURE

In *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis tells an allegorical story about a ghost of a man afflicted by lust. Lust is incarnated in the form of a red lizard that sits on his shoulder and whispers seductively in his ear. When the man despairs about the lizard, an angel offers to kill it for him. But the fellow is torn between loving his lust and wanting it to die.

He fears that the death of the lust will kill him. He makes excuse after excuse to the angel, trying to keep the lizard he says he doesn't want. (Are you starting to see yourself?)

Finally, the man agrees to let the angel seize and kill the lizard. The angel grasps the reptile, breaks its neck, and throws it to the ground. Once the spell of lust is broken, the ghostly man is gloriously remade into a real and solid being. And the lizard, rather than dying, is transformed into a breathtaking stallion. Weeping tears of joy and gratitude, the man mounts the horse and they soar into the heavens.

In this story, C. S. Lewis shows the connection between killing our lust and finding life. It feels as though destroying our lust will destroy us. But it doesn't. And when we destroy our lustful desire, we come not to the end of desire, but to the beginning of *pure desire*—God-centered desire, which was created to carry us into the everlasting morning of God's purposes.

God never calls us to sacrifice as an end in itself, but only *through* sacrifice on the way to great joy. On the other side of the seeming loss and denial is always reward and pleasure so deep and so intense that it's almost impossible to call what you gave up a sacrifice at all. And that's true even if the suffering and self-denial God calls us through lasts a lifetime.

If you ever expect to find victory over lust, you must believe with your whole heart that God is against your lust not because He is opposed to pleasure, but because He is so committed to it.

In his book *Future Grace*, John Piper writes:

We must fight fire with fire. The fire of lust's pleasures must be fought with the fire of God's pleasures. If we try to fight the fire of lust with prohibitions and threats alone—even the terrible warnings of Jesus—we will fail. We must fight it with the massive promise of superior happiness. We must swallow up the little flicker of lust's pleasure in the conflagration of holy satisfaction.

Do you want to be free from the oppression of lustful desires and actions? Do you want to get off the treadmill of guilt and shame?

God offers you and me hope in a surprising way. He doesn't tell us to lower our standards to a place where we think we can do it in our own strength. He calls us to embrace the standard of His Word—not even a hint of sexual immorality or impurity. God wants us to despair in our own strength so that we have no other option but to throw ourselves on His grace.

That's the mystery of His plan. You will find His strength in your weakness. As you despair in yourself, you will find hope in Him. And as you turn your back on lust, you will discover that true pleasure is something only God can give.