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## Grateful Heart: An Antidote to Lust

Written by Alan Medinger

Did you ever wonder why your struggles with lust seem to come in cycles? For some reason you seem to struggle mightily with lust for a number of days or weeks and then, for no apparent reason, the struggle subsides. You go through a relatively easy time, but then, almost inevitably the powerful temptations return and the struggles start all over again.

When I was acting out homosexually - before I was a Christian - I used to wonder about this. I remember even thinking, maybe it has something to do with the phases of the moon. At times it seemed that regular. I knew that this phenomenon was not unique with me because I heard others talk of it and I read of it - even the phases of the moon suggestion.

With women such heightened feelings of sexual desire could correlate with their monthly cycle. There is some evidence of this, although this is probably not the whole answer. But what about men? We don't have anything that corresponds to a menstrual cycle. The closest thing to it would be that there is a build-up of semen that creates a physical desire for release. But, if this were so, then masturbation would release it and the pressure would go away. In actuality, the opposite seems to occur. Give in to masturbation today, and you are more likely to masturbate tomorrow, not less. In fact, for many men the times of intense struggle can go on for days, even weeks. "Release" does not change the cycle.

With what then can we correlate these cycles? What goes on inside (or outside) of us that causes us to go through periods of intense struggle with lust? And if we find out, is there something we can do to make the struggles less intense or their occurrence less frequent?

There is probably no single answer to these questions, but in examining my own struggles with lust, I have come up with a correlation which I believe may have some fairly broad applications. Very briefly, my struggle with lust seems to intensify when I have an ungrateful heart. Certainly this will take some explanation.

Let me begin by commenting on the basic nature of lust. Lust is not the same thing as sexual desire. We are apt to feel sexual desire at any time. Lust occurs when we decide to take our sexual desire and apply it to fantasies or memories or specific images. I believe that almost always, at the very instant that we have a sexual thought, we are presented with the choice of either entertaining that thought or of rejecting it. This is the critical point as regards lust. One time we'll say, "I'll pursue this pleasure, maybe just a little bit." Of course the "little bit" is in reality a big bit of self-deception. Once we invite lust in it becomes a very difficult guest to get rid of. At other times we say, "No, I'm not going to do that," and the desire is gone without any real struggle. The fact that we can respond in such totally opposite ways indicates that something different is going on inside of us in the two situations.

What I am saying is that our battle with lust depends to a great extent on how we respond

when temptation first hits, and that something inside of us helps guide that first response. This is where I believe having either a grateful or an ungrateful heart has its impact.

In ministry, as well as in my own life, I have seen two attitudes creep into strugglers that precede giving in to lust; two voices, if you will. One says, "I deserve something." The other says, "I shouldn't have to go through this." The names of the two voices are pride and self-pity. They are the antithesis of a grateful heart. Both pride and self-pity are common responses to low self-esteem, a condition seen by many as one of the most common roots of homosexuality - especially in men.

Pride exalts the self. Pride tells me I deserve good things. Pride tells me I have earned good things. Pride tells me that I am the real judge of what is good for me.

Sexual pleasure is a good thing. "I deserve some sexual pleasure. With what I have been doing recently, I have earned it. Really, I am the one who should determine whether or not I should have this good thing." These rationalizations may be what can cause temptation to come on so strongly after we have experienced a significant success. In my life, if I have given a talk that went especially well or completed a project that came out quite successfully, a voice inside sometimes tells me that I deserve a reward.

Self-pity is the other side of pride. Self-pity tells me what a poor thing I am. Self-pity tells me that I haven't received a fair shake in life. Self-pity tells me that I deserve some comfort.

"I deserve the right to comfort myself considering what I have to put up with in life. I shouldn't have to deal with sexual struggles along with everything else that's laid on me. God, it just wouldn't be fair to deny me this little bit of pleasure." This type of thinking may be what causes us to especially want to retreat into lust when we are angry or have experienced rejection. A grateful heart, on the other hand, knows that really we don't deserve anything. All that we have including our talents are gifts from God. I do not need to reward myself because God has already given me so much more than I deserve. In a grateful heart, there is no room for pride.

A grateful heart is not going to pity itself or need self-comforting. Facing troubles or difficult times, it is able to put its problems in perspective. Out of a grateful heart comes a view of life that recognizes that we are not entitled to a life free of problems. Self-pity doesn't even enter the picture.

Most of us seem quite able to bounce back and forth between pride and self-pity, giving ourselves all kinds of justification for plunging into the polluted pool of lust. The heart is deceitful, and to win the war against lust, we are going to have to find some ways to change our hearts.

Seeking to develop a grateful heart is something far more profound than seeking an antidote to lust or finding a new way to resist temptation. It requires a major change in our heart, one that is so deep that it will change the way we live. Such change will cause us to respond very differently when we are confronted with the temptation to lust. Such a change is so deep that it is only going to be experienced in a life devoted daily to seeking a closer walk with the Lord.

The means whereby we can gain a more grateful heart are fairly obvious if we think about them. Here are just three that anyone can try:

1. Let prayers of thanksgiving be a central part of your quiet times. When I am down or irritable, sometimes I will thank God for every blessing that I can think of: every part of my body, every gift that I have, every relationship, every possession, and of course the most precious things of all - life, salvation, Jesus Himself. Words of thanksgiving have the power to change us.

2. Expand your intercessions to include prayers for some of the neediest people wherever they are. I just received an e-mail message relaying a request from a bishop in Rwanda asking for prayers for the terrible suffering that is going on among people in his area. How can we not gain a truer perspective on life when we pray for people whose sufferings are so much greater than ours.

3. Prayerfully seek to uncover your attitudes of self-pity or pride and repent of them. For me, discovering my deeper sins and repenting of them has probably done more to change the person I am than anything else I have done.

The Holy Spirit will cooperate with you on this. God wants you to have a grateful heart because He wants each of His sons and daughters to have a victorious life. And He has revealed to us that our sacrifice of thanksgiving is pleasing to Him.

An ungrateful heart draws us into ourselves and therein lie our difficulties. A grateful heart connects us with God, our source of all things that are good.

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