

“LOOKING AT PORNOGRAPHY”

Galatians 5:16-26

This morning’s sermon is entitled “*Looking at Pornography*”, which has elicited a few wry smiles when I’ve told people who’ve asked me what we’ll be doing on Sunday morning. If it had been advertised as an illustrated talk it might have drawn more people. And saying that probably exemplifies something of the problem we face when talking about such a subject – it gets kind of lost in a “nudge, nudge, wink, wink” sort of attitude. But the subject of pornography is one which we really do need to get our heads round as those who claim to be followers of Jesus, the Kingly Messiah. You’ll remember, I hope, that we’re following a short and rather irregular series at the moment, looking at some of the big issues of our day and thinking about our attitudes to them as Christians. The question we’ve been asking is whether we’re being squeezed into the world’s mould, conforming to the thinking of the culture around us rather than being transformed by the power of God’s Holy Spirit.

As with so many other things that are woven into the warp and weft of our society, this is an issue that has kind of crept up on us to the extent where it is pretty well unavoidable. But we haven’t really noticed what’s been happening, so we suddenly stop and wonder how on earth we got to this point. Again, a preoccupation with pornography – and all that goes with it – has been present in Western culture for a very long time, but it has been held in check to some extent by legislation and convention. Those checks have gradually been done away with in the name of free speech, self-expression, liberal attitudes and all the rest of it – and the ubiquitous tentacles of a largely unpoliced Internet have clearly also played their part.

But the increasing sexualisation of our culture, which we have touched on over the past few weeks, means that pornography intrudes into pretty well every area of our lives. We are surrounded by sexualised images. The language of sex is used in songs and adverts, in sit-coms and documentaries. It’s all over the television and snakes its way through the cinema. You have only to glance at the music channels on the television to see that the videos made to accompany the current crop of pop songs are little short of obscene. But, in a sense, we’ve just got used to it. Then something comes along which makes you sit up and think, “Hang on – what’s going on here.” Maybe you see a kid coming towards you wearing a t-shirt with “Porn Star” emblazoned on it. Or you’re watching *The One Show* or listening to Chris Evan’s morning radio show – marketed as being a show for all the family – and you realise that the guests are all there to promote a porn movie called *Fifty Shades of Grey*. What’s going on here?

Let’s just remind ourselves, before we go any further, what we’re talking about here. We mentioned a couple of weeks ago, when we were looking at *1 Corinthians 5*, that the Greek word “*porneia*” had come to mean sexual immorality – that’s the way Paul uses it and that was pretty current in Greek at the time.

If you add “-graphy” to a word in English, that refers to something to do with writing or depicting things. So “pornography” is really about depicting – in words or images – something of a sexual nature, something that by many measures we would take to be immoral. Usually for us today it means sexualised portrayals of the human body (most often female) or explicit writing about sex. One of the questions we need to think about – and we’re not going to explore that this morning: you can talk about it in your housegroups – is when does something become pornographic. What about all those classical paintings of nudes? Why is Rubens OK (if you think it is) but Playboy is not? What about classic works of literature which include such things? What about *Song of Songs*? Is it to do with how explicit it is? Or whether it’s simply entertainment? Or the extent to which it arouses lust?

What I’d like to suggest this morning is that much of what is around us is pornographic because it has an undue emphasis on sex and sexual images. And I think that is unhelpful for reasons we will explore as we work through this. You see, much of what surrounds us – and I’m not talking about the really hardcore stuff that is available on the Internet – we may think is relatively harmless. After all, it’s victimless – it doesn’t really hurt anyone. We may try to justify it by saying that it is all about self-expression, it demonstrates a liberation from very narrow ideas, we cannot really judge and censor any more. As I’ve already said, it’s always been there – you only need to look at some of the inscriptions at Pompeii or read a bit of Juvenal’s Latin poetry to see that. And we do live in a culture where it’s not really on to apportion blame and all that kind of thing. Richard Hoggart, in his book *The Way We Live Now*, writes that we are riding a wave of relativism – “*the obsessive avoidance of judgements of quality, or moral judgement*”. He suggests that we say that there is no blame to be attached to anything anyone does, so we should not judge, we should not blame. And that is probably why it has crept on us.

Because, you see, there clearly are problems with all this – especially now that it is such an integral part of our culture, from Page Three topless models to explicit portrayals of nudity and sex on television programmes to the way sexuality is used to sell us stuff. It’s everywhere – accessible to anyone of any age via the Internet and across cable and satellite TV. If you’ve ever seen any interviews with jihadists and their sympathisers, one of the things that is often mentioned is that this culture is suffused with sexualised images and attitudes, and that has contributed to their radicalisation. I’m not suggesting that we all go and bomb the adult shop on the A38 or behead glamour photographers, but we clearly do need to think carefully about how we respond. Because it is not harmless and there are some very clear victims in all this.

As we’ve said, all this stuff is widely accessible and is easily seen by all ages at any time. So what effect is that having on relatively young minds? It is clearly offering young people a very skewed view of what relationships are all about, suggesting that sex is the be-all and end-all of a relationship. It gives young

men, particularly, the idea that they can treat girls in the way they've seen on the screen and that their girlfriends should just go along with it.

That's partly because in pornography the human body – especially the female body – is objectified, turned into just another product. Sex is seen as a commodity, something to be bargained for, to be bought and sold. And that clearly leads to prostitution and then to trafficking, to violence, to crime, because money is involved. You can look at resources provided by organisations such as *Stop The Trafik* and read there the stories of those who have been kidnapped, conned, drugged, beaten to satisfy the lusts of others and to make money for the pimps and pushers.

Another harmful consequence is that pornography – in its most common form – gives a perversely idealistic view of what our bodies are and what sex is all about. That can lead on to a lack of tenderness and affection in relationships. It is one of the causes of lack of self-esteem in girls who feel their bodies should look like the perfectly formed and presented bodies on the music videos and in the sub-pornographic teenage magazines they read. You have only to glance at the problem pages in such magazines to see that the kinds of issues that are affecting very young teenagers stem from a distorted view of sexuality. And it can give people the idea that the grass is greener elsewhere because their relationship isn't as brimful of passion as those depicted in the films and television shows they watch – so relationships break down under the pressure of trying to imitate that.

As with anything else that we access for pleasure, we always want the thrill to grow, we easily become bored with what we've already experienced. So for those who find themselves constantly wanting more and more of it all, the path to sexual violence, to greater perversion and to child abuse is a very slippery one – especially for those who want to act out the fantasies that have been stimulated by the pornography they have seen.

So it is not harmless fun. It is not a victimless activity. There are consequences to all this. But the ubiquity of it all and the “culture creep” that has been going on mean that it seeps into our attitudes if left critically unchallenged. And, as we have seen time and time again as we've looked at these themes recently and as we have worked our way through Matthew's Gospel, it's the attitudes we cultivate that are paramount in all this. Jesus spotted that when he said, in The Sermon On The Mount, “*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart*” (Matthew 5:27,28). It's what's going on in your mind that starts it all off. And there's another question for your housegroups here – at what point on the spectrum from “Those are finely chiselled cheekbones” through “That's a rather nice shape” to “I'd like to sleep with him or her” does an appreciation of God's handiwork become lust?

You see, attitudes eventually lead to action and that nearly always means complications. There's probably no better example of this in the Bible than the story of David as he spotted Bathsheba having a bath and, no doubt, started to lust after her, then called for her to be brought to him, had sex with her and ended up getting her pregnant and having to kill her husband. It all started with an attitude that said, "I'm just going to have a quick look – no harm in that, surely?"

You see, for us as followers of Jesus, this all goes against a biblical view of purity and holiness. (You were starting to wonder when we'd get round to looking at the Bible, weren't you?) The Bible is very up front about sex and sexuality. It's a gift from God, no doubt about it. God has built it into the human condition to bring pleasure and for people to enjoy. But he has also provided the safeguard for all this by making it very clear that it should be enjoyed within a covenant relationship: that's what marriage is all about. It's not something to parade about the place and to be used for, effectively, "cheap thrills".

Which really leads us on to the next point. By and large, pornography can be degrading, but even if it is not – and is provided by people who are quite happy to produce it – it displays a distinct lack of respect for another human being who has been created in the image of God. It is reducing that person to an object, an object being used for your own gratification. In the end, I suppose, it becomes a form of idolatry.

Now, when we stop and think about it, when we are brought up short and start to see that this is perhaps not the harmless fun we might have thought it was, we have various responses. We may well protest, as we've already done this morning, really, that it's just crept up on us and now we're really overwhelmed. There's nothing we can do other than bemoan the current state of affairs and accept that we've just got to live with it. Rod Liddle, in his recent book *Selfish Whining Monkeys: How we ended up greedy, narcissistic and unhappy* (a hugely entertaining but rather foul-mouthed rant against contemporary culture) says our attitude to such things is "*that none of this is our own fault, but it has happened ineluctably, and it could not be otherwise*". If we accept that, though, we have allowed the world to squeeze us into its mould – and, more to the point, we don't believe God can help us.

The other response is to shift the blame away from us to something else. There are many people who would refer to their use of pornography as an addiction. There, it's not my fault: it's a medical condition. It's something someone else has got to help me with. I think I referred to a survey in *Christianity* magazine last time, a survey that found, amongst other things, that only 5% of Christian men looked at pornography on a daily basis, but 42% described their behaviour with regard to porn as compulsive or an addiction. The writer of the article wondered why those two figures were not closer together and

concluded that describing their behaviour as addiction was giving them a way out of really dealing with it. As he writes, “*By calling them addicts we have given them a mental excuse to concede defeat.*”

But we need to realise that there is an alternative response. Liddle is writing about the wider culture but these words are very appropriate here: “*We are not totally powerless, not entirely at the mercy of external forces ... It is pointless and, I think, cowardly to try and exculpate ourselves on the grounds that we are passive recipients of cultural change which have been imposed on us without our connivance. The philosophies we cheerfully embraced came from somewhere; they did not manifest themselves, unbidden, from the ether.*” St Paul in his letters reminds us again and again that we have choices to make. In the passage we read from *Galatians 5* he tells us that we have “*crucified our sinful nature with its passions and desires*” – that is a conscious choice we have to make. In *Philippians 4:8* he says, “*Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.*” You can choose to look at and think about other things.

Our task really is to recognise the problem and do our best not to be conformed to those things which are unhelpful for us and degrading to other people. At the heart of it – particularly when thinking of this issue of pornography – is what we read in vv22,23 of that reading. Paul is talking about what he calls “*the fruit of the Spirit*” – the evidence in your life that the Holy Spirit is at work – and part of that fruit is “*self-control*”. It is being disciplined about our choices, because our choices have consequences. Think of those things that Paul mentioned in *Philippians 4:8* and do your best to ensure that they are the things you take into account when you are trying to live in a culture that is as sexualised as ours. Get your attitudes right so that you can indeed make the right choices in what you buy, in what you watch – put a little sticker on your television remote control that says “Self Control”! Consider – particularly the females among you – how you dress, because that can have an effect on how people view you. (There was an amusing report in *Private Eye* this week, taken from a newspaper in Montana, in which a local politician was talking about extending the state’s indecent exposure law to include all tight-fitting beige clothing!)

Think carefully about what you share with other people and what you talk about – the content of your conversation. If your conversation sounds like a script from a *Carry On* film, maybe you need to think about the extent to which your attitude is being influenced by the culture round you in an unhelpful way. Such talk can be degrading, offensive and, again, normalise what the Bible clearly teaches is unacceptable behaviour. In *Ephesians 5:3,4* Paul writes this: “*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.*”

Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving.”

Now, I suspect there will be all sorts of responses to all that – feel free to come and tell me afterwards, and if you want to discuss it, go along to a housegroup that’s following these sermons – but it all seem to me to boil down to one thing and Paul tells us what that is in the passage we’ve read this morning. In *Galatians 5:25*, he says “*Keep in step with the Spirit*”. In other words, allow God, through his Holy Spirit, to lead you and guide you day by day. He does that by working through your conscience as well as by other pointers and signposts – maybe even sermons sometimes! But we need to listen to that voice of conscience and to pray for his help day by day. We do not have to give in to the influence of our culture – there is a choice. We can allow our attitudes to be shaped and guided by God as we focus on Jesus and listen out for the Holy Spirit. What Paul says in *Romans 8:5* is very good advice – and maybe a good place to close: “*Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.*” Let’s give it a go!

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In *Galatians 5:25*, Paul says "*Keep in step with the Spirit*". In other words, allow God, through his Holy Spirit, to lead you and guide you day by day. He does that by working through your conscience as well as by other pointers and signposts. But we need to listen to that voice of conscience and to pray for his help day by day. We do not have to give in to the influence of our culture – there is a choice. We can allow our attitudes to be shaped and guided by God as we focus on Jesus and listen out for the Holy Spirit. (Look at *Romans 8:5*)

Questions for discussion

1. What makes something pornographic? Are classical works of art featuring nudes or sculptures of naked figures? What about sexually explicit passages in great works of literature?
2. When does appreciation of the beauty of one of God's creatures turn into lust? What do you understand by "lust"?
3. Why is it so important to get our attitudes right?
4. How can we present our objections to pornography in a positive way? How do we protest without appearing to be killjoys and fuddy-duddies? Should we protest?

5. What role does the government have in curbing pornography? What role does the Church have?
6. How can we help young people to develop a right attitude to all this?
7. How can we "*keep in step with the Spirit*" and help others to do so as well?