

[Let Him Kiss Me with the Kisses of His Mouth](#)

Underneath the surface understanding of lust as a vice lies a puzzle, a network of curious questions. Like many of the deadly sins, it is an excessive manifestation of a natural human tendency, in this case, the tendency to desire. Desire is a mental state produced by lack, a state of wanting what is not yet attained by someone. But lust is an extreme, in the sense that its desire is for what is already abundantly available; lust is insatiable in the face of moderation. There are many things that human beings desire—wealth, pleasure, food, and more. In the common Christian understanding of lust, it applies most to the intense and obsessive longing for sexual gratification. Some have assessed the seven sins and named lust the least of them. Be that as it may, it is unequivocally considered immoral, especially when compared to its sister, passion, which is good, and moral, and god-ordained. Lust has to do with temptation and a lack of control over the flesh. While passion stands behinds us, driving us toward what we want, lust dominates the thoughts. It does not guide, but often compels, and leads us astray.

Now we have an idea of what we are talking about, but find ourselves in the conceptual environment of sex and morality, regulations and limits. Here, it is impossible, or irresponsible, not to consider the gender of desire; our ideas around who is allowed to want how much, whose longing is seen as properly measured, and whose is crossing the line and going a little bit crazy. This is a question about patriarchy and the government of bodies. To explore this, let us look into the Bible, at the accounts of three different women whose narratives revolve around the damning and redeeming qualities of their sexual desire.

The first of these women is the one accused of adultery by the Pharisees. She is judged by the law of Moses, and it is decided that she be stoned to death. [Psychoanalysis tells us that desire itself is intrinsically linked to something known as the drive toward death. But, in this case, it is an external force which acts upon the accused woman.] Condemnation would be her fate, if not for the intervention of Jesus as he passes by. Rather than advocating for this woman, Jesus instructs the Pharisees to first look inward, to question whether they are perfectly free of sin themselves, before subjecting the woman to their punishment. And then, Jesus looks away from the scene. When he looks back, the woman has been left alone. Without her asking, he has saved her, and he tells her that he does not condemn her. His instruction for her is to go and sin no more.

This account bears similarities to the woman, in Luke 7, who “leads a life of sin,” although there are some interesting differences in the scenes. This woman has no name, and the nature of her sin is never mentioned—we cannot say whether she is herself guilty of adultery, whether she is a sex worker, or something else. We only gather that her sins are what identify her; to the people of this town, her life of sin is who she is. Yet she shares an intimate moment with Jesus—compared to the woman accused of adultery, this woman comes in closer proximity to him and is met with a statement of forgiveness which I find deeper than the earlier episode. In this case,

Jesus declares that her sins are actually forgiven, that her faith has saved her, and that she should not just go and sin no more, but go in peace. I find this beautiful. But what kind of intimacy is shared here, to differentiate the terms of redemption? This woman seeks out Jesus where it is known that he will be attending a dinner, he does not happen to walk past her by chance. Instead of words, her actions speak for her. She weeps at his feet, wipes away tears using her hair, she kisses his feet and anoints them with an expensive oil called spikenard. Along with the symbolic and long-lasting fragrance of this oil, its decadence is also notable in its costly price. We know, from information supplied by a disciple of Christ in another story, that the oil costs about 300 denarii, the worth of 300 days' full wages. It is with this extravagant oil that the sinful woman anoints the feet of Jesus. The paradox of having plenty, in a sense, and yet lacking profoundly, makes this a scene of great desire.

To better understand the significance of spikenard, this rich and mythical oil, we can go into the Old Testament, and hear from our third woman of desire. She is the bride in the Song of Songs, the Shulamite, a beautiful black woman found in an erotic courtship with her bridegroom. From the text of the poem, the bride is noted to be exquisitely and extravagantly well-adorned, her cheeks shine with earrings of precious stone; her neck is lined with expensive chains. And she wears the oil, the spikenard, whose fragrance emanates from her and draws the total attention of her beloved. The Song is, of course, the great erotic poem of the Christian bible, controversial for the clarity of its romantic passion. It is where desire touches on something transcendent. The passion between the lovers is undeniably magnetic, drawing them toward each other. It is overwhelming, too, as they have to sing their desires to a chorus, externalizing the experience of overflowing passion. There is that familiar compulsion to be in a union with the beloved, as the Shulamite, from the depths of her longing, cries, "Draw me after you, let us run." Even from the beautiful opening lines of the poem, the atmosphere is crystal clear. "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—for your love is sweeter than wine." Extravagance abounds in this poem.

Extravagance is another aspect of the Latin word to which lust is attributed: *Luxuria*, which implies an indulgence of the senses, giving into pleasures and even finding value in them. The application of spikenard is symbolic in several ways—it is at once a substance of seduction and sensuality, as well as one of anointing, consecration, spiritual connection. Through this symbol, I wonder if there is an extravagance to the very love of Christ, who is committed to an infinite amount of unconditional forgiveness. After all, he tells Peter that one must be willing to forgive another, not seven times, but an astounding seventy by seven times. In forgiving the sinful woman, Jesus also offers a parable to the Pharisees, of someone who forgives a debt of fifty denarii as easily as that of five hundred denarii. As is the case with lust, or *Luxuria*, this is an instance where what we denote as a great amount, an excess, is reduced, or revalued, to nothing.

It may be possible that faith is not all that different from desire, in that it is a state which combines lack with belief, a sense that what is not yet part of us may still be attained, and that we will be better off when we have this new addition to ourselves. To the question of value, we see that although forgiveness creates a clean slate, there is a scale of cost to what is given up and what is received in pardon. The parable of the denarii shows us that the one who is forgiven the greater debt ends up loving more. Even the Pharisee recognizes this. While the grace of Christ is abundant to keep every sinner from condemnation, there exists a variation in the actions undertaken to perform the desire for this forgiveness. In contrast with the woman accused of adultery, who is pardoned by chance, the sinful woman makes humble but seductive moves in display of her faith. She seeks out Jesus in the place where he is, expressing her plea not in words but by actions: she weeps, she kisses feet, pours out expensive oil, emptying her alabaster jar and kneeling at his feet, so that the grace of redemption might descend upon her. And thus, the complex and multifaceted nature of seeking forgiveness, the distinction between “Go and sin no more,” and “Go in peace.” Repentance, like desire, functions in a dynamic of hidden cost, of giving up in order to get, of tension between lack and extravagant abundance.

The negotiation of desire is what makes us fully human. Although the Song of Songs is often taken as an allegory of love between Christ and the church, it is important that this love is conceived as sensual, and is manifested in the longings of the flesh. The Biblical scenes of these three women teach us something about the power of love, an abundance of redemption and forgiveness, a link between seduction and grace. When we come to see desire as a fully human experience, we must then think more deeply about our regard of female desire and women’s sexuality, in particular. As a religion which is organized around a patriarchal structure, we must be attentive to how morality is wielded in, as the Pharisees put it, the law of Moses. These women show agency in approaching their own desires, they speak and act out of knowing what they long for, they act, or do not act, as they feel drawn to. Instead of positioning itself as the judge of these conscious choices of passion and gratification, the patriarchal order of religious morality must first look into itself, as Jesus urges the Pharisees, and first become conscious of its own shortcomings. For we are all, as creatures of the flesh, subject to sexuality and sin, and burdened by the responsibility of identifying for ourselves where we must draw the line, and when we must give up our indulgence and extravagance in order to receive the grace we may lack. For none will be condemned in the abundant forgiveness of Christ, and all can be forgiven of sin, if we make the moves necessary to demonstrate our desire to be so. As we learn from the parable of the debt of denarii, the more aware we are of what we ourselves must be, and have been, forgiven of, the more consciously we can experience grace, and the better we can love.