

Dostoyevsky on Why Lust is Dangerous

I've [pondered before](#) on this site if Christians sometimes focus on sexual sin too much.

While I believe a strong case can be made that many of us do, I also believe that our culture as a whole is likely prone to overlooking the practical dangers of lust. (Many of us have seen the harm of this firsthand, either in our own lives or the lives of people close to us.)

I can't recall a better articulation of this point than an excerpt featured in Dostoyevsky's magnum opus *The Brothers of Karamazov*, arguably the greatest novel of all time. (Kurt Vonnegut famously wrote that *Brothers* is the one book "that can teach you everything you need to know about life.")

This, perhaps, should not be surprising. Much of the book's plot is driven by lust. In fact, the pivotal act that propels the story is largely driven by the odd love triangle (square?) involving the family's patriarch, Fyodor Karamazov, and two of his three sons, Ivan and Dmitri. All three of them are ensnared by the seductions of Grushenka, a beautiful 22-year-old Jezebel who takes joy in turning the family against one another.

Alyosha, the youngest of the Karamazov brothers, a saint-like novice monk, has difficulty understanding this. He refuses to believe that his brother Dmitri, who is engaged to a lovely young woman of patrician stock, could be besotted with Grushenka, a woman of low moral fiber.

At one point a fellow monk-in-training, Rakitin, tries to explain to Alyosha the very real power Grushenka holds over his family:

*“You see, if a man falls in love with some beautiful woman, with a woman’s body, **or even with just one part of her body** (only a sensualist can understand that), he’ll sacrifice his own children for her, he’ll sell his own father and mother, and his country, too. If he’s honest, he’ll go and steal, if he’s gentle, he’ll kill, if he’s faithful he’ll deceive.”*

Later in the book, in a conversation with Dmitri, Alyosha explains that he understands his eldest brother’s weakness. In fact, he says the brothers are virtually one the same—the only difference is that Alyosha has not permitted himself take the first step on the ladder of lust:

Alyosha: “The ladder’s the same. I’m at the bottom step, and you’re above, somewhere about the thirteenth. That’s how I see it. But it’s all the same. Absolutely the same in kind. Anyone on the bottom step is bound to go up to the top one.”

Dmitri: “Then one ought not to step on at all.”

Alyosha: “Anyone who can help it had better not.”

When Dmitri asks if he believes his brother can resist taking that first step, Alyosha confesses that he fears he cannot.

Alyosha’s comments are quite honest and humble. They also would seem to dovetail closely with a key message from Scripture: The key to overcoming sin is not resisting temptation, but being *kept from* temptation.

This distinction might seem subtle, but it’s worth pondering.

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