

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland

The problem of moral decay

As Sister Holland and I recently disembarked at a distant airport, three beautiful young women getting off the same flight hurried up to greet us. They identified themselves as members of the Church, which wasn't too surprising because those not of our faith usually don't rush up to us in airports. In a conversation we hadn't expected, we soon learned through their tears that all three of these women were recently divorced, that in each case their husbands had been unfaithful to them, and in each case the seeds of alienation and transgression had begun with an attraction to pornography.

With that stark introduction to my message today—one it is challenging for me to give—I feel much like Jacob of old, who said, “It grieveth me that I must use so much boldness of speech . . . before . . . many . . . whose feelings are exceedingly tender and chaste and delicate.”¹ But bold we need to be. Perhaps it was the father in me or maybe the grandfather, but the tears in those young women's eyes brought tears to mine and Sister Holland's, and the questions they asked left me asking, “Why is there so much moral decay around us, and why are so many individuals and families, including some in the Church, falling victim to it, being tragically scarred by it?”

But, of course, I knew at least part of the answer to my own question. Most days we all find ourselves assaulted by immoral messages of some kind flooding in on us from every angle. The darker sides of the movie, television, and music industry step further and further into offensive language and sexual misconduct. Tragically, the same computer and Internet service that allows me to do my family history and prepare those names for temple work could, without filters and controls, allow my children or grandchildren access to a

global cesspool of perceptions that could blast a crater in their brains forever.

Remember that those young wives said their husbands' infidelity began with an attraction to pornography, but immoral activity is not just a man's problem, and husbands aren't the only ones offending. The compromise available at the click of a mouse—including what can happen in a chat room's virtual encounter—is no respecter of persons, male or female, young or old, married or single. And just to make sure that temptation is ever more accessible, the adversary is busy extending his coverage, as they say in the industry, to cell phones, video games, and MP3 players.

The sin of lust

If we stop chopping at the branches of this problem and strike more directly at the root of the tree, not surprisingly we find lust lurking furtively there. *Lust* is an unsavory word, and it is certainly an unsavory topic for me to address, but there is good reason why in some traditions it is known as the most deadly of the seven deadly sins.²

Why is lust such a deadly sin? Well, in addition to the completely Spirit-destroying impact it has upon our souls, I think it is a sin because it defiles the highest and holiest relationship God gives us in mortality—the love that a man and a woman have for each other and the desire that couple has to bring children into a family intended to be forever. Someone said once that true love must include the idea of permanence. True love endures. But lust changes as quickly as it can turn a pornographic page or glance at yet another potential object for gratification walking by, male or female. True love we are absolutely giddy about—as I am about Sister Holland; we shout it from the rooftops. But lust is characterized by shame and stealth and is almost pathologically

clandestine—the later and darker the hour the better, with a double-bolted door just in case. Love makes us instinctively reach out to God and other people. Lust, on the other hand, is anything but godly and celebrates self-indulgence. Love comes with open hands and open heart; lust comes with only an open appetite.

These are just some of the reasons that prostituting the true meaning of love—either with imagination or another person—is so destructive. It destroys that which is second only to our faith in God—namely, faith in those we love. It shakes the pillars of trust upon which present—or future—love is built, and it takes a long time to rebuild that trust when it is lost. Push that idea far enough—whether it be as personal as a family member or as public as elected officials, business leaders, media stars, and athletic heroes—and soon enough on the building once constructed to house morally responsible societies, we can hang a sign saying, “This property is vacant.”³

Ways to guard against temptation

Whether we be single or married, young or old, let’s talk for a moment about how to guard against temptation in whatever form it may present itself. We may not be able to cure all of society’s ills today, but let’s speak of what some personal actions can be.

- Above all, start by separating yourself from people, materials, and circumstances that will harm you. As those battling something like alcoholism know, the pull of proximity can be fatal. So too in moral matters. Like Joseph in the presence of Potiphar’s wife,⁴ just run—run as far away as you can get from whatever or whoever it is that beguiles you. And please, when fleeing the scene of temptation, do *not* leave a forwarding address.
- Acknowledge that people bound by the chains of true addictions often need more help than self-help, and that may

include you. Seek that help and welcome it. Talk to your bishop. Follow his counsel. Ask for a priesthood blessing. Use the Church’s Family Services offerings or seek other suitable professional help. Pray without ceasing. Ask for angels to help you.

- Along with filters on computers and a lock on affections, remember that the only real control in life is self-control. Exercise more control over even the marginal moments that confront you. If a TV show is indecent, turn it off. If a movie is crude, walk out. If an improper relationship is developing, sever it. Many of these influences, at least initially, may not technically be evil, but they can blunt our judgment, dull our spirituality, and lead to something that could be evil. An old proverb says that a journey of a thousand miles begins with one step,⁵ so watch your step.
- Like thieves in the night, unwelcome thoughts can and do seek entrance to our minds. But we don’t have to throw open the door, serve them tea and crumpets, and then tell them where the silverware is kept! (You shouldn’t be serving tea anyway.) Throw the rascals out! Replace lewd thoughts with hopeful images and joyful memories; picture the faces of those who love you and would be shattered if you let them down. More than one man has been saved from sin or stupidity by remembering the face of his mother, his wife, or his child waiting somewhere for him at home. Whatever thoughts you have, make sure they are welcome in your heart by invitation only. As an ancient poet once said, let will be your reason.⁶
- Cultivate and be where the Spirit of the Lord is. Make sure that includes your own home or apartment, dictating the kind of art, music, and literature you keep there. If you are endowed, go to the temple as often as your circumstances allow. Remember that the temple arms you “with [God’s] power, . . . [puts His]

glory . . . round about [you], and [gives His] angels . . . charge over [you].”⁷ And when you leave the temple, remember the symbols you take with you, never to be set aside or forgotten.

Remember the Savior

Most people in trouble end up crying, “What was I thinking?” Well, whatever they were thinking, they weren’t thinking of Christ. Yet, as members of His Church, we pledge every Sunday of our lives to take upon ourselves His name and promise to “always remember him.”⁸ So let us work a little harder at remembering Him—especially that He has “borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows . . . , [that] he was bruised for our iniquities . . . ; and with his stripes we are healed.”⁹ Surely it would guide our actions in a dramatic way if we remembered that every time we transgress, we hurt not only those we love, but we also hurt Him, who so dearly loves us. But if we do sin, however serious that sin may be, we can be rescued by that same majestic figure, He who bears the only name given under heaven whereby any man or woman can be saved.¹⁰ When confronting our transgressions and our souls are harrowed up with true pain, may we all echo the repentant Alma and utter his life-changing cry: “O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me.”¹¹

Brothers and sisters, I love you. President Thomas S. Monson and the Brethren love you. Far more importantly, your Father in Heaven loves you. I have tried to speak today of love—real love, true love, respect for it, the proper portrayal of it in the wholesome societies mankind has known, the sanctity of it between a married man and woman and the families that love ultimately creates. I’ve tried to speak of the redeeming manifestation of love, charity personified, which comes to us through the grace of Christ Himself. I have of necessity also spoken of *el diablo*, the diabolical one, the father of lies

and lust, who will do anything he can to counterfeit true love, to profane and desecrate true love wherever and whenever he encounters it. And I have spoken of his desire to destroy us if he can.

When we face such temptations in our time, we must declare, as young Nephi did in his, “[I will] give place no more for the enemy of my soul.”¹² We can reject the evil one. If we want it dearly and deeply enough, that enemy can and will be rebuked by the redeeming power of the Lord Jesus Christ. Furthermore, I promise you that the light of His everlasting gospel can and will again shine brightly where you feared life had gone hopelessly, helplessly dark. May the joy of our fidelity to the highest and best within us be ours as we keep our love and our marriages, our society and our souls, as pure as they were meant to be, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

NOTES

1. Jacob 2:7.
2. See, for example, Henry Fairlie’s excellent *The Seven Deadly Sins Today* (1978).
3. See Fairlie, *The Seven Deadly Sins Today*, 175.
4. See Genesis 39:1–13.
5. Lao Tzu, in John Bartlett, comp., *Familiar Quotations*, 14th ed. (1968), 74.
6. See Juvenal, *The Satires*, satire 6, line 223.
7. Doctrine and Covenants 109:22.
8. Doctrine and Covenants 20:77; see also verse 79.
9. Isaiah 53:4–5.
10. See Acts 4:12.
11. Alma 36:18.
12. 2 Nephi 4:28.

The choir sang “Nearer, My God, to Thee.”

Elder Craig C. Christensen offered the benediction.
