

DEALING WITH SEXUAL TEMPTATION
The Christian and Sexuality
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This is the fourth of a series of five messages on “The Christian and Sexuality.” Next Sunday night we’re going to be looking at the theme “Healing our Broken Sexuality.” We’ve looked at the topic Christian heresies on sexuality. Basically we enumerated two. The fact that it’s something we don’t talk about. Or on the other hand, that sex is evil and of the devil. We said those are heresies.

The second evening on sexuality was “Made in the image of God.” Our sexual nature is a reflection of God’s character. He made us male and female in his image. The completion of our sexuality reflects the fact that God is a communicating God who loves to know and not just know in a verbal sense or intellectual sense. But to know in an experiential sense. He also celebrates. He knows the depths of joy. And God also creates. Which is one of the meanings of the sexual relationship, the means whereby children come into the world.

Then last Sunday night we looked at the place of sex in our relationship. Many people make the mistake of separating sexuality from relationships. In relationships we’re looking for things that make all relationships satisfactory and joyous. Whether it’s the relationship among friends or the relationship in family or the relationship in marriage which involves the sexual relationship. We’re looking for relationship that allows us companionship. We are not created by God to be lonely people. We need to be with others. We’re looking for relationships that bring affirmation, that encourage us and help us to know our true identity and be our better selves rather than tearing us down. We look for persons to build us up. And we look for relationships that have altruism in them. That’s a fancy word that means to look out for other’s needs. By being in relationship with someone I am able to do things I could not do by myself. There’s a greater good and we seek that in relationship.

Tonight we’re going to be looking at the theme of sexual temptation, dealing with sexual temptation. I’d like to go through this subject by looking at 12 key principles.

1. We need first to have a Christian view of sexuality. That’s what we really tried to do in these past Sunday evenings. Many times we in the pulpit in our concern for holding biblical standards immediately come to you and basically say in regard to sexuality *Don’t*. We never inform you of a reasons, a theology, an understanding of what God is trying to say through our sexuality. Therefore since we have no reason for being pure morally other than we’re not supposed to be impure morally. It makes us more susceptible to temptation because we don’t understand God’s purposes for us. So we try to understand some of God’s purposes. I’ve been saying that we need to be driven, in regard to sexuality, more by our theological urges than by our biological urges. The problem comes when we’re driven more by our biological urges. That is the subject we looked at in some detail last week – masturbation. Historically this has been a matter that has not been dealt with in Christian teaching or from the pulpit or in Christian literature. Or if it has, in a hell fire brimstone manner. The fact is that in regard to masturbation biological urges swamp the system of the body. We need to respond to these urges with teaching. That the act of masturbation for example does not fill the deeper need we’re looking for. We’re looking for the need to communicate. We’re looking for the need to celebrate. We’re looking for the need to create in our lives. That’s why God made us sexual beings. Yet masturbation brings no communication. Instead of bringing celebration it brings guilt. And it cannot be a creative act.

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In fact it is a destructive act especially if it is occurring in a marital situation where in marriage there is not sufficient relationship between the two partners so that one person in the relationship is resorting to masturbation. That begins to destroy the relationship because the person more and more withdraws into their own self and into their own shell of fantasy and illusion. We need to respond to the biological urges with the understanding that masturbation does not meet our deeper needs of companionship, affirmation and it's not an altruistic act. So that getting away from the emotionality of the subject for a moment to just simply look at the fact that does this act really meet my deeper needs. And we get reeducated. Instead of letting our biological urges swamp our system we begin to think what is going on here and what is this saying about myself. Our theology tells us that sexuality is God's gift to lead us outside of ourselves than to lead us into ourselves.

This principle of theology over biology also applies to courtship. In courtship, dating, if we let the physical relationship get into the driver's seat you're short-circuiting the development of the relational process that God has in mind. The head is on top of the heart for one good reason. The mind ought to be in control of your emotions,

2. We need to make a distinctive between temptation and sin.

Here many persons are hung up because they think that to be tempted is to be sinning. It's not at all. You cannot obviously have the prospect of sinning if you're not tempted. So let's get rid of the idea that we must feel guilty if we're tempted. That there's something bad about us. Therefore we are tempted. We need to recognize that temptation is part of our ongoing process that is meant to frustrate us into the character of our lives after the character of God. Temptation is designed to lead us away from the image of God in us from being fully all that God's designed us to be.

There are really four stages of the temptation process. I've articulated these as suggestion, consideration, consent, and permission. I.e. the temptation of Eve.

The first part was the serpent said to her "has God said?" And he began to put a suggestion into her mind that would cast doubt on the instruction that the Lord has given. "All the fruit you can eat of but the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you may not eat of." So the temptation simply began as a suggestion. There was no sin in that for Eve, simply hearing the suggestion.

The next step was consideration. She began to actively consider the possibility but she had made no decision to go after it.

The third step was consent. Genesis 3:6 tells us what happened "When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye and also desirable for gaining wisdom." She hadn't done a thing except mentally see a picture. When she had mentally affirmed the picture, at that point she had given in to the temptation. She had consented so that the next words are "she took."

That's commission. The actual doing of the deed.

In the Old Testament of course sin is located at the fourth level. All of the commandments are gearing toward the act, the act of murder, the act of adultery, the act of breaking the Sabbath, the

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act of lying and they did not so much have to do with the intent. As long as you did not do the act you were safe under the Old Testament law.

Jesus though in responding to the hypocrisy of the Pharisees drives home the deeper meaning of the law and pricks the heart. Jesus locates in Matthew 5 sin as entering on the consent level. "You've heard it said by those of old, thou shalt not murder, but I say whoever is angry with his brother has committed murder. You've heard it said of old whoever commits adultery is wrong. But I say whoever lusts in his heart has already committed adultery." He's looking at the Pharisees who are walking around beating themselves on the chest saying, Aren't I a good person. I've never done the act. He's attacking this comfortable religiosity and he's saying but you had the intent.

One of the problems here with the Lord's teaching is that sometimes a spiritual sensitive person is honestly trying to get over inward things of lust and rage and lets the Lord's words here become a really heavy millstone around them. It only drives them deeper into frustration, "I can never get above this because I sin in my thought life." We fail to realize that the Lord in giving this teaching originally gave it to very self-righteous people to prick their heart and bring them a sense of guilt and sin. I think it should be used in that context and not be used as a millstone. The Lord never intended it to be a millstone around people who were honestly recognizing what was going on in their life and were seeking to come out of it.

There's a difference between bringing a person short because they've got a cocky attitude and on the other hand lifting someone up who is really broken and who seeks some change in their lives.

Temptation and sin. Every temptation you find in scripture you'll find these processes at work. The Lord in the wilderness. The suggestion came to him. Three different suggestions were given by the devil. He licks temptation on the meditation level. He does not take long to disregard it. He immediately has an instinctive response to reject temptation.

That is something we must ask the Spirit to begin putting a new kind of internal code in our life. A sort of reflexive system. We ought to be asking the Lord to put a reflexive, knee jerk, system in our lives morally so that we begin to seek the response that whenever we are tempted sexually our instant reflex is to say no to a temptation. So that we can begin repudiating the temptation on the consideration or meditation level. Rather than waiting until we've internally given consent and then do the act.

Luther said it well. You cannot keep the birds from flying over your head but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair.

3. A third thing we need to realize about temptation is that temptation is at our level of strength or our level of weakness, however you want to put it.

That's why every one of us is tempted different. You may be a person who is not tempted sexually at all and therefore you cannot possibly understand why this is such a problem with other people. But there is an area in your life where you are tempted. That keeps us from having a better than thou attitude toward other people. Just because we're immune in one area doesn't mean that we're perfect in all respects. The temptation will come at our level of strength or weakness.

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Example in our Lord's first temptation, the devil comes to him "Turn these stones into bread." I would welcome a temptation from the devil on that matter. Turn matter into an edible substance. I'd love to be able to do that but there's no way I could do that. But the Lord was given that one because it was touching a very real potentiality with his own life. He had that power. He had that power to do something for himself. Therefore he was tempted on that level. When the scripture says Jesus was tempted in all points such as we are it simply means that he went through the whole range of varying levels of vulnerability.

Where are you vulnerable to temptation? Remember that the scripture says he will not allow you to be tempted beyond your level of strength. Beyond that which we are able. You think, "That's no comfort for me – the temptation I'm wrestling with seems to be beyond my level." Take comfort from it. God's word is true. It's neat that you're not facing something worse than that. And the fact that you're facing it means that God has a high enough view of you and his work in you that somehow you're going to have the strength to be able to face that. The temptation will be at your level of strength.

I've generally found that if you resist temptation on one level the temptation moves up and gets more sophisticated and goes to a deeper level. On the other hand if you begin yielding to a temptation you'll find that that temptation just keeps repeating itself over and over again. It's like Satan knows where he can turn on the button – a Pavlovian response – and get you to fall every time. So he doesn't bother with any more sophisticated work on you. But if you'd like to face more sophisticated forms of temptation let me encourage you to begin resisting.

4. Temptation is often an invitation to short circuit a normal process by gaining quick results.

For example: back to the stones to bread temptation. There is nothing specific in the Bible that says thou shalt not turn stones to bread. And bread is ok. Especially when you've gone 40 days without eating and you need to eat or die. There's nothing wrong with that.

The problem with it was it was designed as a short cut on a normal process. The underlying principle was whether Jesus would do a do-it-quick-yourself kind of miracle and meet the needs or whether he would really trust in the loving protection of the Father. Whether he would short circuit himself or he would wait upon God to supply his need, which he has. If he short circuits it as stone turned to bread he will do the same thing again on the cross. He'd come down from the cross and save his suffering. Really the temptation was do something quick for yourself. Save yourself.

Temptation is of such a nature it is taking into our own hands the control of rearranging our circumstance. There's nothing wrong with that if you can do it without breaking God's law. But if in order to meet your needs you break God's law you short circuit a process of dependence upon him. You're basically saying, Lord, I know best and I don't trust your provision in this matter. I want immediate quick results and gratification. Temptation to short-circuit the process that God was wanting to accomplish.

5. We need to be aware of the subtle temptation to feel that sexual experience will fulfill our deeper needs.

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Why is there so much sexual promiscuity now days? Why do people have such casual sexual liaisons? It has to do with the short circuiting process. We feel that somehow if we can reveal ourselves sexually we will fulfill our potentiality as a person. But we find when the event is over that our sense of worth has not been enhanced. The gaining of affirmation has not occurred. And we wind up frustrated not understanding that God's place of sexuality is to meet deeper needs of companionship, affirmation and altruism. We have wanted in the sexual experience a sense of worth. But we have instead gotten guilt. We have wanted affect but instead we have gotten only a temporary emotional response that maybe has been very loving for a while but later has in it all kinds of bitterness and anger and resentment. Some people engage in sexual experience simply to affirm their masculinity or femininity. Yet the deeper needs of our maleness or femaleness have not been met.

The sexual urge is normal. God created it. The problem of it comes when it's accompanied by our broken self-image, which can only be restored in God's hands. If we try to restore it ourselves we run into difficulties. We need to be aware of these subtle temptations to fulfill our sexual experience and to miss out thereby meeting our deeper needs in life.

6. We need to define our limits before our passions are aroused.

This is the difference between Joseph and David in the Bible. Joseph had defined his limits evidently before he met Mrs. Pother and he said no. David didn't define his limits and he was sitting on his veranda one day and Bathsheba was there. He had not set his limits in advance. Because he didn't he fell very easily prey to the situation.

Jesus taught about our sexuality and about our setting limits – “If your eye offends you in regard to lust pluck it out and if your hand offend you cut it off.” It's obvious that the early Christians never took Jesus literally on this. This is a hyperbole – an over statement, an exaggerated statement intended for effect. But what Jesus was saying about sexual lust is the two most potent ways of sexual temptation to come to us is through the eye gate and through the touch gate. The two powerful senses of sight and feeling. He's basically saying put guards up around what you permit yourself to see and what you permit yourself to touch.

Notice there are some other passages that he talks about cutting off your foot. But in the sexual temptation passages he never includes that. There's a good reason. It's very difficult to be holding to be sexually tempted by holding toes. The Lord knew what he was doing in that scripture.

Christians who are unmarried should avoid the mentality of how far can we go physically. Can we drive on the edge and not go over. Once in a dating relationship you have established a level of physical contact it's very hard to back off and do less. Because the nature of our sexuality is that it demands more and more. Too much physical contact in a relationship begins to push away the other vital building blocks of the relationship. The friendship aspect, the affirmation aspect, the need to know the person as another person. What happens when the physical relationship begins to get too intimate is that it crowds out the other things that God wants to develop in your relationship.

I was taught to set sexual limits in advance so that any girl I ever dated I would be able to look square in the face and not have any regrets. I dated a lot of girls and now when we get together

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at homecomings or the like there's a lot of neat times because there was a value invested in the friendship and it did not grow to the point so that it later became uncomfortable. I think in dating there are so many opportunities for wholesome relationships. Why short-circuit the process by becoming guilt ridden because of an area of physical contact. You really destroy the goodness that God made you to get out of that relationship. When we go beyond wholesome physical limits we begin to introduce frustration into a the relationship. Premature intimacy which God designed later for the knowingness of marriage. They bring about an uncomfortableness in the sexual relationship because we're not ready yet for that level of knowingness and it short circuits things that God wants to develop.

I'm not going to tell anybody where the limits ought to be. The Holy Spirit is a much better teacher.

I'd ask you – have you set your limits? If you are not a married person, have you set your limits? It helps to set the limits in advance. Be in the driver's seat rather than the passenger's seat. The Lord tells us to pray "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." I always thought that was part of a process. Our whole attitude of life as "Lord, I don't want to be tempted so don't lead me into temptation." Because we're human we are going to be tempted. Therefore I want to have the confidence when I get into a temptation that the Lord is with me there. If I've been praying "Lord, don't lead me into temptation," and I find myself in a temptation then I have to say Lord you chose not to say yes to that prayer. You said no. So that temptation I'm facing is one you've allowed. Therefore I can pray the backup prayer: "Deliver me from evil."

My whole attitude is not don't see how close I can come to caving in and prove my strength, but I'd rather stay away from it altogether. But if I'm praying that and find myself in the place of temptation then I have the confidence that he's allowed me to be there to test my strength for his glory. I can count upon him to give me the resources and if I fail to give me the forgiveness and the grace to try again.

7. We need to know that Jesus equated the inner act of lust with the outer act of adultery there is still a key difference between the two. He's says if you committed adultery in your heart you've already sinned. We need to recognize that although lust and adultery are equated both sin by Jesus there is a key difference between the two. Between the actual act of adultery or sexual immorality and the thought. The key difference is this. The thought – the lust itself – involves solitary sexual sin. But adultery or sexual immorality draws someone else into the sin. Therefore adultery has social dimensions that the act of lust itself may not have.

I've always been intrigued by the statement Jesus made to the woman taken in adultery where he said to her, "Go and sin no more." I wondered how many times that scripture has been a millstone to believers who have honestly tried to deal with the matter of sexual lust and temptation in their life and here Jesus is telling a woman to go and sin no more, whose life had been a life of sexual immorality. I can't second guess what actually happened. But it seemed to me logically in the light of all the scriptures to believe what the requirement the Lord laid upon her was that from now on there was to be no more adultery in her life. I'm not sure that the Lord put upon her the idea that never again will you be tempted with lust. Never again will you fail mentally. But what he was saying to her was never again will you have the relationship. Not only that as you cut the outer act it gives the opportunity for the inner life to be renewed.

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One of the things in treating persons with homosexuality and there are many persons today working with people helping them to be delivered that they make the distinction between the overt behavior and the inward attitude. The first thing that must be ended is the overt behavior. Because as long as the overt activity is going on there is no chance to begin to cool down and redesign and let the Holy Spirit redesign the inward attitude. So the absolute overt activity must end. That gives God then a chance of working and redesigning the inward life as well.

8. We need to realize we're more vulnerable to sexual temptation when we are angry.

Deep forms of anger. Anger that expresses itself "I'm hurt. I'm depressed. I'm bitter. I feel revenge." Or an unforgiveness in our life when we maybe look at what someone else has done to us. I'm convinced that most adulteries occur probably at the bottom of 99% of adultery you will find anger. You will find a spouse who feels denied, who feels hurt, who feels misunderstood and resentful. Maybe not 99%. I believe there are some people who are just outwardly willfully sinful and have no regard for other people. But adultery and anger go hand in hand.

If we are carrying hurts in our life those can lead us to want to be loved. Because sexual intimacy conveys to us the illusion that we are being loved. It may not be that in regard to the sexual partner. The partner may be just wanting sex.

When you look at the temptation of Joseph in the Old Testament I think one of the keys to Joseph's situation and being able to resist the temptation with Potipher's wife was there was not anger in his life. And he had a lot of reasons for anger. He had every reason to be mad at his family and angry at God. It's amazing what anger does in our lives. Years later when he confronts his brothers he says, You meant it for evil but God meant it for good.

Have you ever thought about the hurts in your life and instead of nursing that and being resentful toward that saying, God may have allowed that to happen in my life in order to develop some positive things in me. Lord what do you want to develop? Help me to forgive that person. Help me to develop the positive things in my life that need to be developed so it won't make me weak and vulnerable in other areas.

9. We need to acknowledge how truly spiritual we are the greater will be our sense of sin.

If you have a sensitive conscious. If you are easily convicted of sin you are a spiritual person. If you look at Isaiah 6 in the Old Testament you'll find Isaiah's call and he sees the Lord high and lifted up in the temple. He cries out when he sees the Lord "Woe is me for I am undone. I am a man of unclean lips and I speak with an unclean tongue. You look at Isaiah's life and you'll find he is morally impeccable. The finest of the finest in the Old Testament. "Man of an unclean tongue" – when you read Isaiah he is a literary genius. His words are like sparkling diamonds. Unclean tongue? But Isaiah has seen God. Whenever you really see the character of God even the smallest imperfections of your life show up.

Many times a person who is involved in flagrant immorality has really no conviction of sin and doesn't seem at all bothered by it. The reason why is they really have not seen God yet. You're not bothered by sin when you don't see God. But when you really begin to come into contact

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with what God wants in your life you become extremely sensitive to those fine hairline cracks in your integrity and your life that shine under the radiance of God.

I say that as an encouragement to us. There are some of you who struggle with the sin of wrong sexual fantasy and you feel condemned for that. Romans 7 is the chapter that describes you. "That which I would not I do." There's a difference between honest guilt and a sensitive conscious which becomes so sensitive that we're unable to live before God and receive his grace. God wants us to get a hold of the magnitude of his character and our own unworthiness. Then get past that to Romans 8 to where it says, "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ." And not base our relationship with God upon how well we're doing with his inner law in our hearts but how well we're doing with God in terms of the relationship that God has made possible through grace. Our relationship with God is not based upon obedience to the law. But it's based upon grace and faith in Jesus Christ. This then becomes a solace and something we can fall back upon and realize that grace of God picks us up. We are sensitive to sin because we are spiritual and we're trying to walk in the Lord's image.

10. We need to face the prospect of temptation always being with us.

It may not be that sexual temptation will be with us for always although it may well be. But we'll always be tempted our whole life. When you make spiritual progress you get more on the front lines of spiritual warfare. Even with Jesus, he was tempted. The devil left him for a season. But only for a season. He didn't leave him permanently. But the beautiful thing is the Holy Spirit will fill us to our capacity with strength. He will help us so that we can meet the temptation.

11. We need to be careful that we do not create conditions that would make a fellow believer more vulnerable to sexual temptation.

This simply means not being sexual provocative and irresponsible in relationship with another person. In marriage it means not deny sexual relationship. Because denying sexual relationship in marriage Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7 exposes that person to greater testing and temptation and they may be ensnared by the enemy. So there are two sides to the coin. In non-married relationships we're told not to be sexual provocative or irresponsible. In married relationships we're told not to adopt a pattern of withholding sexual expression from one another. Lest we make a fellow believer more vulnerable to sexual temptation.

12. We need to anticipate a successful handling of temptation, which then brings greater strength into our lives.

Many of us connote temptation with failure. We don't see it as connoted with success. Maybe it's because of our own track record. James 1:2-4 says this about any form of testing or temptation. "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials [temptations] of any kind." Why should we consider that joy? You're going to be called upon to be alert for the challenge that's before you. The whole reason why God's permitting the challenge is not to bring you down. You go into the testing to win. It's not punishment. It's form of reward. It's showing how well we've improved. "Count it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of any kind because you know that the testing of your faith [or any testing] produces perseverance." That simply means to remain under, to abide, to be constant, to develop staying power. To

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develop the kind of reserve that sees the situation through to its conclusion and doesn't budge until you've stood your ground and won the course. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete not lacking anything." Paul says in Romans 5:3 "Suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character..." It's all a process at work in our lives.

The testing that we face are producing a positive spiritual good in our lives as we approach them. We're to approach them from the standpoint that with Christ's help we can conquer these.

What if I lose? What if I give in to temptation? Get up off the floor! There's a sense that we're not defeated if we lose one round. There are many rounds yet to go. Let's learn what we need to learn. What if I fail more than once? I think when Jesus told Peter when he asked "How many times should I forgive someone? Seven times?" And Jesus said, "No, seventy times seven." If the Lord tells us on a human level to forgive that many times another human being how many times do we think God's willing to forgive us? We are undergirded by the power and forgiveness of God. He tells us to get back up and get in the game. Count it joy.

I don't know how to be more direct in facing temptation sexually than these kinds of principles. I've found these helpful in my own life. I hope they're helpful in yours. If there are specific needs that have not been addressed please feel free to talk with me or one of the staff or counselors.

Have you set your limits in terms of your physical contact in a dating or courtship relationship? If you haven't those kinds of helpful limits upon yourself would you as we come to the Lord in these moments of presentation say, Lord, show me the kind of limits I can set for myself so I can protect the integrity of my life. So that I won't give in to the temptation to trade my deeper needs for a sexual experience which doesn't really meet my deeper needs. I need companionship, I need affirmation, I need to be involved in a relationship with someone else that will be a part of something greater than both of us. Outside marriage, sexuality cannot deliver those kind of things. I want to set limits so that I can be pure before the Lord. I'd like for you to make a prayer to the Lord personally of consecration. Dedicate your body to be a holy temple of God. Holy doesn't mean something weird, or strange. But healthy and wholesome and totally set apart for God's use.

Lord, help us to put these limits in our life. Help the young people here to not trade their future for Esau's bowl of soup. Something quick. And miss the satisfaction of a lifetime. Help us to see ourselves as especially set apart and reserved for you and if in your will you choose us to be married to another human being. There are secrets about our inner nature that can only be known to you and the person we marry if we marry. If you call persons here to the single life you will give them in your word a special gift and grace to live singlely and dedicate their great amount of time to serving you and your church and the world. You will meet their needs of companionship and affirmation and altruism in ways outside the sexual relationship. Lord, give us the sense of joy that we're not giving up anything at all when we choose to be pure and be holy. Being that way brings self-esteem. You want us to love ourselves. Rather than trading away that self love in a moment of time and giving in to the hurt that maybe we received from another source we choose to have the same value on our lives as you have. We accept the limits of your word not as terrible limits. But for more freedom. They're given that we might have greater skill in what we're doing. Those that are here that have failed, outwardly or inwardly, give us an assurance in

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this moment of your forgiveness and your restoration. We accept the cleansing of the conscious and the inner life. For married people, help them not to think that the whole payload of their relationship is the sexual relationship. But teach us that there are deeper personal needs that you want to confirm through a married relationship. Sexuality is part but even in marriage we cannot build our lives on sexuality. We must build upon things like esteem and caring and sharing and the opening of our inner life. Help us where we have failed. Renew and restore us there also. Grant us that we may live for you. Bless the younger people here who have not faced sexual temptation to its fullest degree. They're interested in what's being said but they have not yet felt the full deceptiveness of the tempter. Guard them and keep them. When the hour of trial comes let the words of the Spirit come back for a resource for them. Keep them in the good and right way before you. Your way brings us to true life and we thank you.

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