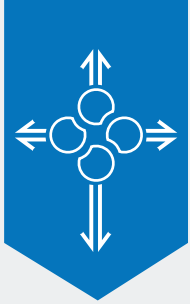


COUNSELING MEN TOWARD LASTING
FREEDOM FROM PORNOGRAPHY



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DISCERNING

COUNSELING MEN TOWARD FREEDOM FROM PORN

I have heard a lot of theories on how to help men deal with the sins of pornography, masturbation and other expressions of sexual lust. “Just stop it.” “You have to recognize that it’s your parents’ fault for the way they raised you.” “Just change your clothes quickly and do not touch yourself in the process.” “You are just reacting to the unmet needs for love in your life.” Now, all of these have at least some wisdom to them. What is more, they all offer something better than what I did the first time a Christian brother came to me and trusted me by sharing his experience with these struggles. I said “Ew, that’s gross! I can’t believe you do that!” I pray that the Lord has grown me and taught me to be a lot more patient, less judgmental, more encouraging and more helpful than I was that day as a 13-year-old.

In all seriousness, the core help that you as a shepherd offer to a single man is not terribly complex (however challenging it may be in a specific situation). You know that this man is at war with the father of lies who wants him blinded and separated from the love and help of his Lord, and your efforts are going to revolve around bringing light, hope, and compassion into darkness, selfishness, and despair.

In fact, if I could boil down the counselor’s task to one sentence, it would be this: pornography is the evidence that something is wrong between this man and his God, and you have the opportunity to help him figure out what that is and what a change in that relationship looks like. Change in our relationship to God always leads to change in our behavior, emotions, motivation, and life direction.

Putting it another way, your goal in counseling a single man on the issue of pornography—as in all counseling (and all of life really)—is to see change in his heart. In Luke 6:43-45 (Matt. 12:33-37), Jesus compares the human heart to a tree, pointing out that a fig tree always bears figs, a thorn tree thorns. His point is that human beings will always speak and act out of whatever is in their

hearts.¹ Jesus actually applies this directly to our sexuality in Matthew 5:27-30, where he says you can commit adultery in your heart even if you don't with your body. This means that we must never be content to settle for mere behavioral change, and that we will always be seeking to see, expose, listen, consider, and change at the level of motivation, thought and desire—i.e. in the heart. Every change in behavior has a motivation; we need that motivation to be a lover of God with heart, soul, and mind.²

Before I launch into specifics, I want to remind us that the way in which you counsel is as important as the content of what you counsel. And this cuts both ways! Having a good manner without good content is just as problematic as having it the other way around. “Truth” spoken without grace is not really truth any more than “grace” without truth is really grace. There is a grave danger for counselors on both sides. If we are going to minister in the name, power, and pattern of Christ, we need to have unwavering commitment to seeing things with the Father's eyes (i.e. as they truly are). This means we approach sinners with the grace and mercy which has drawn each of us and which made Jesus a friend of prostitutes!

In my experience, the biggest reason we err on the side of hammering someone with “truth”—usually limited to some form of “God commands us to be pure” plus a heavy regimen of “self-discipline”—is that our view of sin is fundamentally too small. We have simplified our sinfulness into merely behaviors we consciously choose. We imply that God is pretty happy with us as long as we steer clear of the high-handed and intentional sins.³ We imply that grace gets you in, and then all Scripture has to offer is directives on behavior modification. On the other hand, I find that we err on the side of sweet talking someone with “grace”—avoiding any mention that what he is doing is wrong—when we are afraid of what he will think of us. We fear we will scare him off, hurt him or overburden him by bringing him face to face with the kind of life the gospel does call us to (and empowers). We imply that God is a loose cannon who needs a good PR guy, and our job is to put some better spin on his unfortunate comments.

1. This naturally raises the question as to whether a Christian can bear thorns (i.e. can sin). The rest of Scripture makes clear—not least when Jesus himself speaks of forgiving 70 times 7 times in a day—that Christians do still sin. Addressing the heart then is how we grow in sanctification and come to bear fruit in keeping with gospel transformation.
2. For an excellent and thorough discussion of the biblical use of the word “heart”, see *How People Change* by Tim Lane and Paul Tripp (New Growth Press, 2006).
3. When we limit “real” sin to intentional choices we make, we are becoming functional Pelagians! It is only as we recognize that the depth of sin in our selfish hearts comes out in many godless actions which we do not even notice that we will rightly grasp our complete dependence on grace.

In short, we must avoid both of these errors! So we strive to be exceedingly patient, gentle and encouraging, while never allowing the life-or-death nature of the battle to fall from view.

With this word of caution about how we speak, I will come at the issue of counseling single men with regard to pornography from the angle of looking for specific lies to which they are especially vulnerable. As the fictions that a man has believed begin to be exposed and even erased, the actual desires and motivations of his heart become more evident (and are often more troubling than the reasons he formerly believed were leading him to these sin patterns). But, when heart issues are more clearly on the table, the relevance, power and help of the gospel all become more clear as well!

LIES SINGLE MEN BELIEVE ABOUT PORNOGRAPHY

1. SEX IS A BIOLOGICAL NEED

This is a biggie in our culture. Everyone from psychologists to magazines at the grocery checkout suggest to a man that sex is a biological need. Naturally, if sex is a need I have, then it only makes sense that I would need an outlet for it, right? Well, even at face value we'd want to quibble with this. After all, people have been martyred for the faith, so apparently even life itself is not the ultimate need we have (our ultimate need is God and everlasting fellowship with him in perfect, righteous, delightful obedience to him).

You might say, "Sure, in the big picture that makes sense. But I still need food in the sense that it keeps me alive. It's the same with sex. I have a sex drive that needs some kind of expression or I will do psychological or even physiological damage, right?"

This perspective, even if it is subconscious, is extremely widespread. Yet think about the implication of this. If I really need sex in order to stay healthy, if my biology makes me an engine that will overheat if I rev it up with nowhere to go, then a man struggling to keep himself pure from pornography is in a pretty unpleasant squeeze. On the one hand, he is supposed to keep himself pure, because God wants him to. On the other hand, God has given him this need (and in moments of strong temptation, the language of "desperate need" does not feel like an exaggeration at all) that He refuses to give any outlet for. If sex is a need, it is very difficult not to find yourself blaming God for putting you in an impossible situation.

As with all the lies we are debunking, there is a clear grain of truth. Sex, as part of the covenant of marriage, is meant to be about the highest pleasure we can experience. God created sex to the pinnacle of serving and loving your partner in relationship, and it certainly is exquisitely pleasurable and holds genuine implications for our physical and relational health. A good marriage with good sex will correspond strongly to lower stress, lower blood pressure, better sleep, etc. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul even says that a desire for sexuality in marriage is an appropriate reason to get married rather than guard your singleness in order to serve the church.

But, this does not make sex a “need.” Think about it. Jesus was not married, and never once had sex. Was this an unmet need? Surely if the perfect human, the man more in tune with the will of God than anyone in history, can forgo sexual intimacy, then it cannot be a necessary component of life as a human being! Scripture knows of our need for the living God, and constantly talks about how God provides for our daily needs. But the daily needs always seem to be Lord’s prayer items: bread, water, clothes, shelter, rather than sex (or even love and significance).

This may seem simple, but the implication is enormous. It means a single man desires sex, but does not need it. It means a man has no right to sex, no deep and uncontrollable hunger that must be assuaged. This is a good thing! It actually brings relief to those who grasp it. Instead of sexually “starving” yourself, the path of purity is going to be characterized by rich, comforting, clarifying, hopeful, meaningful spiritual nourishment and growth. Now lust is a mere desire, something a man can actually refuse, just as he could refuse to steal a thousand dollars from a close friend even if an easy opportunity presented itself. Sure you want the money or the sexual pleasure, but if it is just a desire, you can say no. To be free of the “need” for sex is to be free of slavery to irresistible temptation.

Even more important is the affect this difference has on one’s view of God. God is no longer a cruel or capricious dad who buys you the bike of your dreams for your birthday but then won’t let you ride it. Instead, he can actually be the giver of “every good and perfect gift,” and you are not going to miss out on his best because you are single, even if you remain single for the rest of your life (James 1:17, NIV). If God always gives us “everything we need for life and godliness” (2 Pet. 1:3, NIV), then sex is simply one good gift among many which, like good health, riches and athletic ability, we may or may not receive in some degree. Does this man know that God is not holding out on him?

When someone first begins to sense that you do not believe that the physical outlet view is valid, he will likely feel a little threatened—you’ve just undercut the thing that validates the severity of his struggle. He begins to suspect you think he is a wimp and have a load of guilt for him just around the corner. You want him to know you understand how hard this is and that what you are offering is hope and enormous relief in the freedom of this truth. Believing that life is possible without a “fix” is the first step toward victory and purity.

2. LIFE IS ABOUT SEX

You can immediately sense the similarity to the first lie. This one, however, is much harder to recognize in oneself, because it is like a fish trying to notice water. Everything in our culture suggests that sexual fulfillment is essentially the goal of life. This is what we are seeing when attractive women show up in commercials for products they have no real connection to. When we see what the commercial is doing, we laugh at advertisers who want us to think that we’ll end up with a beautiful woman if we buy their brand of breakfast cereal. What goes utterly unrecognized is the premise we unquestioningly share with the advertisers: if something increases your sex appeal/opportunity for sexual gratification, then it is good. We laugh at the idea that a breakfast cereal will make us more attractive and more likely to “get the girl.” We never stop to think that getting the girl might not really be the point at all.

It is very possible to experience significant periods of freedom from using pornography and significant temptation without touching this basic piece of a man’s worldview. To the extent that he is living for sex, however, he will judge his decisions and their consequences on whether or not they brought him closer to getting married, getting girls to notice him, etc. If he does get married, he will continue to function as if sex with his wife was the most important aspect of his life and their marriage. Needless to say, the consequences of this fundamentally self-centered view of life and sex will be subtle but pervasive. If you can hear places in a man’s story where he is living for sex and help him see it too, you will bless him.

3. MARRIAGE WILL MAKE THE PROBLEM GO AWAY

The first two lies both naturally bring a man to this conclusion. I have a biological need. Fulfilling this sexual drive is the basic thing I functionally live for. Ergo,

when I finally get married, I will have my outlet and the thing I most want will be in my possession. Problem solved.⁴

If you have counseled married men, you are already aware of how desperately false this is. If you have counseled a man who held this belief coming into marriage, then you already know how disheartening and guilt-inducing it is to realize he is still struggling. In my experience, this always shakes a man's faith in his relationship with Christ, especially if he operates under the impression that he is the only married man who struggles in this way.

Think again about the biological-need fallacy. If the basic reason you choose to look at pornography is that you have this physiological drive and it has to have an outlet, then marriage really ought to be the last word on the issue. If, on the other hand, the fundamental reason you look at pornography resides in the sinfulness of your own heart (and let me say again that the goal of counseling is helping a man understand, repent of and find grace for his very individual, specific patterns of desire, lust, worship, etc.) then we should not be at all surprised when the problem continues.

Take this from another angle. Have you ever known a man who only ever looked at one pornographic image over and over and never bothered to look at any other image? Neither have I. The vast variety and novelty of pornographic material is part of the allure. So if even the most beautiful and digitally enhanced of supermodels cannot keep you from eternally going farther afield and searching out new women, new scenarios, etc., why would we ever imagine that your flesh and blood wife, with her physical and spiritual flaws, would? Sin by its very nature always lusts for more.

Here is the big picture: pornography teaches men to be utterly selfish in their view of sex, and see sex as all about their own pleasure and gratification. What does sexual selfishness before marriage produce once you do get married? That's

4. For the first time in our discussion, the way we think about men who struggle with same sex attraction will be a bit different. Where men lusting after women may conclude that marriage will solve their problems, men who are lusting after men will tend to turn this in one of three dangerous directions: (a) they will try to simply sweep the problem under the rug, hoping that marriage to a woman will indeed make the problem go away, and they will try to find a nice girl who will "cure" them; (b) it becomes a powerful justification for the rightness of gay marriage; or (c) it becomes a reason for bitterness against God who has not given them the natural end point to their struggle that he has given to "straight" men. However, for men dealing with same sex attraction the bottom line is no different in that entering into the context marriage is by no means the answer to the sin and lust of their heart.

exactly right: sexual selfishness. The only difference is that in marriage he will feel the damage of his sin much more personally.⁵

I was not someone the right girls noticed in high school. I remember asking a leader in our youth group what I could be doing now to best prepare for being married, thinking that this seemed a very mature and spiritual question that might also get me some good pointers on how to be more smooth with the ladies. His answer was greatly disappointing to me. He told me that he wished he had done a better job of guarding himself from pornography and sexual fantasies and said this was the best thing I could do. I wanted tips to on how to impress girls with my maturity; he gave me something much richer—what your heart loves now, it will always love unless you actively confront it.

4. IT IS ONLY A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE I FALL

This is probably the most subtle of all the lies that attack a man's perseverance and self-control. Anyone who has been a Christian longer than a week or so has noticed the reality that they still sin. Any gospel-centered church should be preaching the reality that we are not going to be perfect before we get to heaven. While great progress and rich growth is not only possible, but in fact expected as we walk by the Spirit, we all have to face the facts: we are sinners who will continue to act out of fallen hearts till we stand with Jesus and see with fully open eyes just how awful our sinfulness was and just how deep his grace really went.

So isn't it simply a fact that men will fall from time to time? Isn't it actually important and helpful to tell men that we know they aren't going to be perfect and that Jesus still loves and forgives even when they stumble sexually? Yes and no. Yes, God's grace is toward his children and he will forgive the repentant soul, even the seven times seventieth time. And thank God that this is true, not just with lust but with every sin!

But the more important answer is actually "No, it is not a matter of time before you fall." Now we obviously need to be careful not to build up a hope based on a man's own effort! Nor do we want to set the bar far too high in a way that crushes men. If, however, we grasp this truth, it is enormously liberating.

5. Another important sub-group of single men to consider is men who have been widowed or divorced. Their temptation here will in some ways be stronger. "I remember what it was like to have sex with my wife, and I feel cheated that God has taken that away. I can't make it without that outlet!" This attitude will be tempting for almost every previously-married man at some point.

Think of it this way. If a single man is simply holding out as long as he can before his next crash, he has already accepted defeat as inevitable, and is now trying to postpone that defeat as long as he can. He feels like the Germans in December of 1944, fighting and suffering in what he knows to be a lost cause.

An analogy I have shared with a number of men is feeling like you are in a desert—hot, weary and thirsty—and you see an oasis off the side of the dusty path. It is shaded and lush with palm trees and cold water, but you know that you have to keep pressing on down the path because it's wrong to drink from the oasis. The problem is that you know you can only take so much more of the blistering sun before you eventually collapse at the next oasis. The analogy works for most strugglers with pornography and masturbation because their experience is that pornography is a source of escape and sweet refreshment in their hard/boring/exhausting/disappointing world (notice the many heart motives that all lead to the same escape!). Of course they are eventually going to fall into the trap of sin—it is the place they finally get to quench their thirst!

You see the problem. Because pornography is what essentially gets a man through his day/week/month, the question is “how long can you go without what you need” before you're too weak to keep walking.

Here is a better, more accurate analogy. Pornography is a bottle of deadly poison with sugar around the rim.⁶ It is literally going to kill your soul if you keep drinking it! Further, life is not an unrelenting desert where God the drill sergeant forces you to pass by the watering holes. Rather, it is a path you walk with a Shepherd who is leading you to still waters where you can drink and green pastures where you will find restoration for your weary soul. Even when the path to the water is going through the desert of the shadow of death, you do not need to bolt off at the sound of a trickle of rancid water; the Shepherd is there and he will take you to water that actually quenches your thirst. When you assume you will fall again, you are smuggling in the belief that pornography is a really great thing you are fasting from. Freedom comes when you realize that raising the poison to your lips is not a given—it's drinking spiritual death! Hope is when you begin to pray for and desire eyes that see lust as the hideous evil it really is and begin to yearn for the Shepherd's water instead.

6. Ed Welch's *Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave* uses a similar analogy drawn from the book of Proverbs and is the best book on helping people with pornography I know, even though it is not simply for people struggling with sexual addictions.

We must not lose sight of the fact that this battle is being fought by the mighty King himself. He will not only conquer, but he delights in raising up warriors clad in heavenly armor (think Ephesians 6) against whom the gates of hell will not stand! In stark contrast, most men feel like the battle is a desperate rear guard action in which they are trying to keep a retreat from becoming a route. The reality could not be more different. The saints of God are backed by the “immeasurable greatness of his power...according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead” (Eph. 1:19-20). The King is with you and that means that victory is not merely possible, but assured. We far too easily buy into a struggler’s view that his King is nearly as weak, helpless, and confused as he is. Jesus Christ does more than offer a little tactical advice or cheerleading as you wrestle a more powerful opponent!

5. IT’S NOT REALLY HURTING ANYONE

As I hinted at above, the lie that pornography doesn’t hurt anyone is a luxury that only a single man or the blindest and most tragically deceived of married men can sustain. Most married men at least see they are keeping pornography secret from their wives, which is pretty strong evidence.⁷

Does pornography hurt anyone? If you don’t have a spouse, isn’t it really just a victimless crime? Not on your life. Here are a couple of reasons.

(a) Think about the women displaying themselves for your pleasure. Aside from any risk of sexually transmitted disease they may be taking, they are universally being pushed and trained by the demands of male lust toward anorexia/bulimia and a view of themselves utterly bound up in their appearance. Regardless of their responsibility in participating, you are at the very least cheering them on and applauding their descent into a plastic, starved, soulless existence and making it profitable. “Soulless” is a bit strong you think? Yet isn’t that exactly what pornography really is—the worship of the body that ignores the presence of a real person actually being there? Treating women as sexual objects (and pornography is the most pure form of this) is to treat someone as if she has no soul and is merely a body.

(b) The pornography industry (and here we are no longer going to be able to make excuses about images that are merely animated, etc.) is inextricably tied

7. Of course some men don’t keep it secret but invite/force their wives to join in watching. This suggests a badly seared conscience. Even with such men, compassionate, prayerful attempts to open their eyes to the evil they are perpetrating will be the first place you have to go.

into a larger system of desperate evil in our world that abuses and destroys women. We need to be honest about the fact that many seemingly willing participants in the pornography industry are either effectively prisoners of people who use drug addictions to keep them doing what they want, or are in fact literally slaves who were trafficked away from their homes for the purposes of pornography and prostitution. Pornography fuels a fire whose flames are burning anywhere we see prostitution, adultery, a culture of casual sexual encounters that massively increases the rate of divorce and abortions, sex trafficking, sexual predators, and abusers of children (these last almost invariably have vast exposure to pornography before committing their first crime). When you participate with the industry and treat their product as good and desirable (yes, even when you don't pay for it), you are effectively casting your vote in favor of all these tragedies.

(c) This sin is waging war against your soul (1 Pet. 2:11)! I will not belabor the point here as we spoke about the deathly “banquet in the grave” in the previous section. Satan wants this sin to become a walled off area that festers in your life and ultimately leads you to prefer pornography and self-satisfaction to the Lordship of Jesus. Pornography, left unchecked and un-repented, is literally a gateway to hell. We do no one a service if we are not conscious that this sin (like every other) seeks to own us and to have our allegiance. The wage of sin is death.

6. PORNOGRAPHY IS EASIER THAN DEALING WITH REAL WOMEN

This is not, in some senses, a lie, nor will you find many men who explicitly think this. However, when you are not married and are facing the challenges of dating, loneliness, potential rejection, etc., your functional belief will often be that pornography offers you something you want from relationships but can't seem to get. Yes, pornography is much easier than dealing with flesh and blood women who can hurt you, reject you, disdain you, ignore you, betray you. Women are sinners and are fragile, and it is not hard to understand why many men find pornography vastly safer than dealing with real women in the real world of relationships, romantic or platonic.

This is not much different than living as if robbing banks is easier than working at a convenience store for a living. It is easier, but you are comparing two unlike things. Pornography is a mockery of relationships, a hallucination of real relationships. Pornography is like wearing the emperor's new clothes: you and the pornographic world around you simply pretend that you are keeping loneliness and rejection at bay.

So you are going to try to help a man articulate what he is really getting out of pornography that is easier/safer/better than actually relating honorably and genuinely with women. I have spoken to a number of men who came to see that a huge allure of pornography was that the women they looked at never rejected them, always invited and adored them. There is something extremely delicious to a sinful soul about being worshipped, and the more beautiful the worshipper, the more desirable the worship. In pornography, a man treats a woman as someone whose purpose is to make him feel good, not as a person he is called to love, serve and whose interests he is actually to hold above his own!

7. GOD CAN'T FORGIVE ME

This is not specific to singles. Any man who calls himself a Christian and deals with sexual temptation is going to have this feeling at some point. For some men, guilt will be extremely prominent. For others, it will seem absent. You can be confident, however, that every man has the experience that he has done something deeply wrong and that he wants to cover it over.

I will not belabor this point, as it is probably the most straightforward lie to confront with the truth of Scripture. What does the gospel do if not deal with guilt! But recognize that this is likely to be an ongoing struggle for him. Your job here is to be the simple, patient, strong, clear voice of grace that is big enough to deal with these specific, real, and ugly sins, not just the generic “I know I am a sinner” we can all easily pay lip service to!

You will find that dealing with guilt almost always makes a bigger impact than you expect. Frequently men come to me looking for techniques and tools to avoid looking at pornography, but it is when they really hear and begin to believe that they are actually forgiven that we begin to see real growth. One man asked the question this way: “Am I estranged from God when I sin this way?” I told him that there was a grain of truth here (i.e. sin is relational and it does grieve God), but that the answer was a resounding “no,” that this is the whole point of the cross. The next two weeks were some of the most joyously victorious he had experienced in years. He lived in the realization that God wasn't furious with him, and that he didn't need to—in fact couldn't—earn his way back into God's favor in a hurry. Yes, the shine on this truth faded after a couple of weeks, as always happens with our moments of clarity. But it meant that the next time he fell into temptation, part of our job was simply to remind him that this didn't put him back in the dog house, needing to work and scrape to get back the joy.

Guilt is a precious gift—it takes us to the cross. But if we come to the cross and then hang back because we fear we are unworthy of it, we are getting the gospel exactly backwards. The cross is for the unworthy. When unrelieved guilt is in play, it is going to be the first place you go and the place you keep coming back to!

FINAL THOUGHTS ABOUT LIES AND COUNSELING SINGLE MEN

Let's be clear: these won't all feel terribly relevant to every man. But do you see how each of them clouds and obstructs a man from loving and finding boundless grace from a God who loves him? So we seek out places where men are living with falsehoods that they might see the Living God who is Lord, Shepherd, and Refuge.

Even for men to whom all of these temptations apply, we are anticipating that the guiding work of the Spirit is going to highlight one thing at a time. Where do you see the Spirit moving in this man as you speak about his desire to look at pornography and guilt? Patience as a counselor asks where conviction and grace are coming alive for him today.

Further, we must keep firmly in mind that the core of shepherding a single man as he battles against lust (or battles to battle against lust) is more than exposing lies; it is rather leading his heart always back to his King by way of the gospel. Even if he does fall into every one of the pitfalls we have just discussed, identifying the pitfall is only the first step. His biggest need is to cling to the God who redeemed him at such cost and to know the power of the Spirit. He will not do this if the struggle is hopeless and he is already defeated, or he actually needs the thing he is supposed to avoid, etc.

MOVING FORWARD: PURSUING THE HEART

Here are a few thoughts and questions intended merely to suggest a trajectory for you as you help your single friend bring some of his inner world into the light where he can find grace and truth.

COLOSSIANS 2:20-3:7

This is my personal favorite passage on dealing with sexual temptations. Do you feel the force of Paul's argument?

1. (2:20-23) You are not going to do this by beating yourself into shape. You'll feel better for a while if you set a bunch of rules, exercise regimens, and plans for

how to do more school work so you won't have as much time to be tempted. But it will never be enough. Rules (of themselves) simply cannot stop the flesh.

2. (3:1-4) "Christ is your life." We don't avoid sin by rules and law. Instead we need to awaken to reality: we are with Christ, we are in Christ, we are "raised" with him. It's a done deal! It no longer makes any sense to live for things in this world, because we died here and the time that remains is a mere foretaste of the delightful fullness of righteousness to come. So we "seek the things that are above," which invites application as broad as Scripture itself. This means we want to see the closeness of our Heavenly Father, who welcomes us in our repentance as Jesus portrays in the prodigal son. This means that we never move beyond the love of Christ on the cross, and it means that only knowing his love can penetrate our selfish myopia. It means we can have complete confidence that God's commands are life-giving and that they bring us into his family and out of isolation, into mercy and out of condemnation.

What does this mean? It means that the gospel of Christ really is the thing that sinners need most in their battle with even the most ingrained patterns of sin!

3. (3:5-7) In light of this reality into which the gospel ushers us, we go and put to death all the junk that would drag us away! The struggle against sin isn't about setting rules to keep ourselves in line, it is about a passionate war on anything that would stand between us and our Lover. It is about seeking out the dark spawning grounds of lustful, pornographic desires and getting violent with them as a warrior of the divine kingdom. If this doesn't excite us yet as we face sexual sin, then we know how to pray: Lord, give me a yearning to see my sin put to death for your glory.

WHAT IS YOUR PORNOGRAPHY USE SAYING?

"What is your behavior saying?" is one of the most important questions we ever ask in counseling. Pornography is sin, yet it also serves as a vivid diagnostic illustration of what your heart is craving and where you are turning from the gospel to other gods for satisfaction. Pornography and masturbation are always sinful symptoms of sin in the heart. Let me prime the pump with two brief examples:

I find pornography a lot more attractive when I am bored. It is exciting and there is little in my life to be excited about.

Can you begin to speak with this man about finding a passion for godliness in the bigger picture of what God is doing in all of history and also about novelty and excitement as potential idols?

I look at porn when I am angry or discouraged. I think I am getting back at God for not giving me what I need.

Can you help this man see that God is utterly committed to justice for the times he has been wronged and that his hope in discouragement is that he can actually cry out to the God who hears and moves on his behalf? Can you do this while also challenging him to repent of the arrogance of thinking that he has a right to punish God or determine what is good and what he needs?

THE DETAILS ARE (SOMEWHAT) IMPORTANT

How specifically do you push a man to confess his sin? Is it enough to know he “fell again”? Do you need to know that he went on the Internet and looked at pornography? Should you press him to tell you what sites he visited and what acts he witnessed and how long he viewed these things?

Obviously, it depends on the man and the situation. Here is the general principle: Scripture is very clear about sin that occurs, without ever being graphic or inviting voyeurism from the reader. We know what happened between David and Bathsheba, but we didn’t get any lurid descriptions.⁸ It is important that you do know enough about what he did to understand the contours of his sin, without asking him to relive it and without inviting the images into your own head (which will inevitably happen if you push into details too far). The danger in not being specific enough, however, is that the most deeply shameful part of the sin where a man most needs forgiveness goes unmentioned and un-dealt with. The classic example is the man who confesses he has looked at pornography, but doesn’t mention that it was same-sex pornography. If he never confesses this, he will actually feel more ashamed, isolated and distant, because he is hiding what he sees as the worst part. He is living as if all your words about grace and forgiveness would change in a flash if you found out what he has really done. The specifics of our struggles reveal the personally unique cravings and lusts of the heart. Christ always meets and redeems us in the specifics, never in general platitudes! When in doubt, ask one more question.

8. I am adapting this from David Powlison’s comments in a video about how much a man should confess to his wife in terms of sexual struggle. <http://ccef.org/how-specific-should-husband-be-confessing-lust-his-wife>

WHAT DOES VICTORY LOOK LIKE?

Inevitably at some point, every man I know, who struggles with sexual sin, asks this question. It is a question that gets at the very heart of our understanding of sanctification, and it warrants its own book. That said, here at least a few signposts.

WHAT IT IS NOT

Victory is not “managing” your sin. We are not aiming for you to cut back the frequency of your pornographic binges to some acceptable standard. A streak mentality—as good as it feels to be on day 54 of not looking at pornography or masturbating—is the death of purity because it puts your performance on center stage. Yes, be excited that it has been a long time (or more than a day!) of being free from the specific sin of pornography. We should celebrate even the smallest of steps away from sin! However, we can’t be content with drinking less poison.

Victory is also not some kind of “cure.” Here I know I am on thin ice with many, and I want to be careful not to go too far. Yes, I believe that it is possible to stop looking at pornography altogether. Yes, I am willing to speak of “deliverance” from sin. But looking at pornography is more choice than disease, and that means that a cure mentality essentially elevates the sudden absence of temptation above the steady work of the Spirit in developing a heart of obedience. Further, everyone I have ever talked to who has been “cured” has then been puzzled and discouraged when they eventually continued to deal with temptation, even if they weren’t falling as much or in the same ways as before. I think the idea of a cure brings us dangerously close to thinking of temptation itself as sinful.

Let me put this another way. Struggle is not a bad thing. Instead, struggle is the glorious work of God as he redeems and sanctifies our fallen hearts. The reason we take a negative view of struggle is because we have too high a view of our own ability to be righteous. The only way you ever escape struggle in this life is if you utterly give into sin and embrace it. Losing in our struggle with any sin is a grievous thing that pains our Heavenly Father and ought to make us desperate for the grace of the cross. But struggle itself is only possible through the reviving work of the Spirit and we should seek to fan struggle into flame rather than hold up struggle as evidence that there is something wrong with us. Of course there is something wrong with us—that’s why we struggle against our flesh!

WHAT IT IS

I prefer to think of victory in terms of fruit (or battles won, if you prefer combat imagery) that comes from the progressive re-orientation of our hearts.

Thus, victory is:

HATING YOUR SIN. This eventually becomes a genuine and instinctive disgust when exposed to the vile lewdness that pornography seeks to glorify, even if there is some simultaneous arousal.

SEEKING GRACE. Simply going to the cross and seeking forgiveness more quickly, wallowing in guilt less and loving Christ's mercy more are all victories. Eventually there is a joy in repentance that leaves a man feeling passionate to honor Christ with sexual purity and it spills over into his struggles with selfishness, pride etc. God's grace with sexual sin actually teaches us about the depths of mercy in ways I have rarely seen elsewhere. As repentance becomes a brokenhearted delight—like singing and weeping at the funeral of a godly friend—you are tasting victory.

SAYING NO. You begin to say no to temptations that you previously would have considered inescapable. You get a pornographic video in your e-mail while in your hotel on a business trip and you immediately delete it. Six months ago it was inconceivable to go on a business trip and not watch smut on HBO. In fact, as grace teaches you to see saying “no” as more important and desirable, you begin to seek out places where you can cut things out of your life that tempt you. Perhaps at first you just stay off the computer after 10 p.m. when your housemates will likely be in their rooms. Then maybe you conclude that you need to stop watching movies alone and that even when you watch with others you need to avert your eyes during scenes that display sexual things even though you might potentially “miss something.” Eventually you may stop watching football altogether for a time, because you can't seem to draw your eyes away from the cheerleaders and you would rather lose something innocent that you enjoy than expose your soul to those brief moments of sexualized captivation. Saying no becomes an act of faith, not only affirming that God alone gives what is good, but also learning to find joy in self-control.

PURSUING ACCOUNTABILITY. You start with confession. Over time, you invite brothers around you who are regularly asking you where the pinch points of temptation are in the coming week. Then you are going above and beyond their questions, speaking honestly about the struggles in your heart and where you see

the Spirit leading you. It means that accountability is not a shameful necessity, but a wonderful chance to bring your actions and your desires into the light and to beg your friends to make the gospel specific to you once again. “Could you remind me again that Christ forgives me and that I am not condemned, and will you tell me about how you are growing too?”

Victory is in evidence when you begin to delight in absenting yourself from tempting situations rather than feeling like you are fasting while sitting in a restaurant. It’s as simple as seeing your own selfish desires recede as you earnestly serve those around you. It’s finding more refuge and comfort in Scripture (which used to simply bring a guilt trip). It’s a life of repentance over the sins of your heart as well as the actions they lead to. It’s a deeper love of Christ and what he has done for you at the cross flowing out of deeper awareness of your sin. It is a glorious, unmerited freedom yielding a harvest of gratitude rather than a cycle of guilt and despair.

Is this so different from the “right answers” we already knew? No it isn’t. But it springs from a different motivation than the “do not taste, do not touch” that comes so naturally. And it is accompanied by a celebration of Spirit wrought victory, no matter how small, instead of a self-imposed standard of behavioral perfection that hasn’t dealt with the deepest problem.

Make no mistake, the struggle almost always gets harder when a man begins to make real change. Now the enemy knows the fight is in earnest, not merely a compromise on frequency or timing. The enemy will step up his game and do his best to make himself needed.

A FINAL REMINDER

Pornography, like all sins, is an expression of our fallen hearts. It feels more controlling than many sins. We decide to pursue it more consciously than many sins. Yet in dealing with the guilt and destruction of this behavior, we have a chance to help a man taste the surprising joy of grace in a way he will rarely otherwise get.

So let’s keep two simple, important things in mind as we seek to love and show mercy to men who are finding the sexual lusts of the flesh compelling.

First, we want to help men see where they are living out of lies that cripple them because we love and care about them. We must never stand above them as

superior to them or expose lies in their lives in a way that grinds them down and encourages them to drown in guilt. Jesus was harsher with the Pharisees than most of us would ever dare to be, and yet he exposed the lies on which they were basing their actions without pride or spite, seeking to wake them up in the only way they could hear.

Second, if pornography is an expression of the heart, let's always seek to hear what the heart is saying. True repentance, true turning and true worship are always heart matters, never simply actions. The man who trades pornography for body building so that he can finally impress girls who used to reject him is still expressing the same heart: his life is founded on a faith in the ultimate importance of a woman desiring him. We rejoice that he has turned away from pornography, but he has gained little in the big picture.

“The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick,” and yet Christ calls and strengthens us to “walk in step with the Spirit” that we might know him—which is life itself!—and “put to death what is earthly⁹!”¹⁰

LEARN MORE

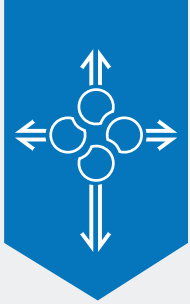
This article is an excerpt from *Porn-Free Church: Raising Up Gospel Communities to Destroy Secret Sins*.

Download the entire e-book for free at:
www.covenanteyes.com/porn-free-church

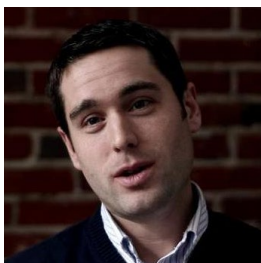


9. Jer. 17:9, Gal. 5:17, (John 17:3), Col. 3:5.

10. For further reading on helping people with sexual addictions and counseling with a view toward heart change, I would recommend starting with (in addition to *Welch's Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave* of course!): David Powlison on breaking pornography addiction available at <http://ccef.org/breaking-pornography-addiction-part-1> and <http://ccef.org/breaking-pornography-addiction-part-two>. Also Winston Smith on masturbation: <http://ccef.org/its-all-about-me-problem-masturbation>. Lauren Winner's *Real Sex* is, from all accounts, helpful as well.



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