

## ***Freed by the Beauty of God***

### ***Closing the Window***

***Steps to Living Porn Free***



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#### WHY DO PEOPLE USE PORN?

Time and again, people talk about the same triggers for porn:

- boredom
- exposure
- loneliness
- opportunity
- stress
- tiredness
- rejection

The following comments are typical: “The things that triggered it were tiredness, depression, loneliness and just not being able to stand up to the constant barrage of sexual imagery any more.” “When I’m bored and alone—that’s the number one trigger.” “Tiny things trigger it. Usually images on the net or TV. Couple this with being alone and you have a bad combination.” “Late at night. When family are out or in bed. Triggers are feelings of tiredness, loneliness and sexual frustration.”

Occasionally the aftermath of a spiritual high can trigger a turning to porn. One person described how he would use porn after “a

really beneficial time spiritually—a conference or a mission.” Another spoke of feeling “I was entitled to some spiritual low” after a “spiritual high or mountain-top experience.” When porn use becomes habitual your thoughts readily turn there, and then opportunity is all it takes to trigger temptation.

### THE REASON FOR PORN

Being aware of the above can help guard against temptation. But none of these triggers fully explains the place of porn in our lives.

Listen to the words of Jesus:

For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man “unclean.” (Mark 7:21-23)

Where do evil thoughts, sexual immorality, adultery, lewdness come from? From within, out of men's hearts. The circumstances of our lives are significant. But they don't fully explain why we use porn. After all, many people are tired and don't turn to porn. No: the Bible teaches that the heart is the source of our behavior.

In the 1980s Gray Jolliffe and Peter Mayle created a cartoon series called “Wicked Willie.” Wicked Willie was a cartoon penis with a mind of its own. Not only were the cartoons coarse, but more importantly they exemplified the idea that we're victims of our sex drive: “It was my willy what made me do it.”

People sometimes objectify the penis, seeing it as an “other” we can blame for our sexual behavior. In the modern worldview, desire and will are often seen to be in opposition. We fail when our desires are too strong for our will, or when our will is too weak to resist. The porn user becomes a victim of his own desires: “My willy made me do it.” This reflects a dualism in modern thinking in which mind and body are two separate entities battling against each other: “I'm a victim of my own body with its sexual urges” (which are seen as separate from “me”).

But in the biblical view of humanity, desire drives the will. I do what I want to do. The source of my behavior is my heart. “Above all else,” says Proverbs 4:23, “guard your heart, for it is the well-spring of life.” In other words, the heart is the fountain or source of my conduct.

Western culture uses the heart to refer to our emotions. But in the Bible the heart represents my essential self. I feel with my heart, but I also think with my heart. I fear, long, love, hope, decide with my heart. Where my heart leads, my behavior follows.

If we don't blame our willy, then sometimes we blame our wives. We've seen that there is evidence to suggest that using porn causes men to show less interest in marital sex and become worse at true sexual intimacy. But it's a mistake to think that the causation works in the opposite direction: that a lack of sex or “poor” sex with your wife leads to porn use. Porn is never simply a substitute for sex. Indeed, there's a sense in which sex is the one thing porn doesn't offer—not real sex. Your wife may not act like a porn star, but then neither does the porn star—not in real life. Porn is not offering you a real experience of sex. It's offering a fantasy substitute for power or success or worship or reward. The problem doesn't lie with your wife, but in your heart. To blame your wife is a form of spiritual abuse—you're transferring the blame for your sin to her; imposing a false guilt on her.<sup>1</sup> “Out of men's hearts,” says Jesus, “come evil thoughts, sexual immorality.”

Or we blame our history. We claim, “My parents made me do it.” Again, there's good evidence that parental relationships have a profound effect on the way people express themselves sexually. Demanding parents who offered little nurture can create a desire to perform that becomes sexualized. We've seen that women caught up in the sex industry commonly experienced an absent father. Sexual abusers were themselves often abused as children. This evidence reminds us of the crucial importance of good parenting. These factors shape people's lives and increase the power of sexual temptation in their lives. But they do not provide a complete explanation for sinful behavior.

When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. (James 1:13-15)

We can’t blame our sin on the circumstances God has allowed in our lives. They may be massive factors, but they’re not sufficient causes. James says the ultimate cause of sin is our “own evil desire.”

James’s words are important for those who claim that porn is the result of a “spirit of lust” in a person’s life. There is no biblical evidence to suggest that demons can inhabit a child of God. The Holy Spirit does not cohabit! Certainly Satan tempts us to sin. Peter says:

Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. (1 Peter 5:8-9)

We are fools if we don’t take this seriously. But we don’t resist the devil through some kind of exorcizing prayer. We do so by being “self-controlled and alert,” “standing firm in the faith,” by avoiding temptation and countering it with the belief that God offers more than sin. James 1 reminds us that, while Satan can use the enticements of the world to tempt us, we can’t blame the devil. We can’t say, “The demons made me do it.” Satan is powerful, but even Satan is not the ultimate cause of sin in our lives. James goes on to tell us to “resist the devil” by coming near to God in humility and repentance (James 4:7-10).

Take a moment to read David’s response to his sexual sin in Psalm 51. See if you can detect any trace of David blaming his sex drive or his parents or his circumstances or the devil. Where does David place responsibility for his sin? Where does he place his hope for the future?

## TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

So circumstances often trigger our sin and shape the form it takes, but they don’t cause it. The root cause is always our hearts and their sinful desires. We sin because we believe lies about God, instead of believing God’s Word, and because we worship idols instead of worshipping God.<sup>2</sup>

If the problem were simply with our eyes, then the solution would be to avert our eyes. But if the problem begins in the heart, then the solution must be much more fundamental. So you need to ask yourself: When do I turn to porn? What’s going on in my heart when I turn to porn?

You might find it helpful to keep a journal. When are you tempted? What’s happening in the rest of your life when you’re tempted? How are you feeling? What’s on your mind? This may help you to see what’s going on when you struggle. You may begin to see what porn “provides” for you. Does it offer an escape? Is it an act of revenge? Is it a way of feeling powerful or loved or wanted? Is it a reward you give to yourself?

You can then begin to identify the false promises that porn makes to you. And then you can also identify the liberating truth of the gospel that can begin to set you free.

## FREED BY FAITH

This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. . . .

And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. (1 John 5:3-5, 11-12)

We can defeat porn. We have victory. There is hope. You don’t need to feel defeated. How do we have victory? Through our faith (v. 4); through believing Jesus is the Son of God. This is where many of us

have gone wrong. We've tried to find victory through our own effort.

Belief in the Son brings eternal life. This means life rather than the empty existence of sin. Peter says we "were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers" (1 Peter 1:18). Jesus gives real life—a full life, life with meaning—in the place of an empty life. And belief in the Son brings eternal life. Hebrews says, "the pleasures of sin [are] for a short time" (Hebrews 11:25). By contrast, Psalm 16:11 says:

You have made known to me the path of life;  
you will fill me with joy in your presence,  
with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

How does faith in Jesus lead to victory over porn? Faith sees through the false promises of porn, sees that God offers more than porn and sees that God is always bigger and better than porn. So faith chooses God, worships God, treasures God, adores God.

"Suppose I am tempted to lust," says John Piper. "The power of all temptation is the prospect that it will make me happier. No one sins out of a sense of duty." So what should I do? Plenty of people say it's a question of the will; but, says Piper, people who strive for moral improvement can't say, "The life I live I live . . . *by faith*" (Galatians 2:20). So how do we fight lust by faith?

When faith has the upper hand in my heart I am satisfied with Christ and his promises. This is what Jesus meant when he said, "He who *believes* in me shall *never thirst*" (John 6:35). When my thirst for joy and meaning and passion are satisfied by promises of Christ, the power of sin is broken.<sup>3</sup>

## **PORN IS ALWAYS A SYMPTOM OF UNBELIEF AND IDOLATRY**

Psalm 51 is the prayer of David "when the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba." You'll find the background story in 2 Samuel 11–12. Psalm 51 is a powerful prayer of

confession that, over the years, many Christians have made their own.

But have you ever noticed that it makes no mention of sex? It's a prayer of confession after an act of adultery, but there's no mention of that adultery. Indeed, David says to God:

Against you, you only, have I sinned  
and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you are proved right when you speak  
and justified when you judge. (Psalm 51:4)

Clearly, David had sinned against Bathsheba, against her husband and against his other wives. But first and foremost, he had sinned against God. Your porn is a sin against your wife, against women and against the church. But above all, it is a sin against God.

The early theologian Augustine saw himself as a sex addict. He wrote in his autobiographical *Confessions*, "From a perverse will came lust, and slavery to lust became a habit, and the habit, being constantly yielded to, became a necessity and they held me fast in a hard slavery." Looking back, he recognized that this slavery was a reflection of his hunger for God: "I was seeking you outside myself, and finding not the God of my heart."<sup>4</sup> G. K. Chesterton said: "Every man who knocks on the door of a brothel is looking for God."<sup>5</sup>

Among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. . . . For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. (Ephesians 5:3–5)

A man who is immoral, impure or greedy "is an idolater." The context makes it clear that the writer is talking about sexual immorality and greed for sex. Sexual sin is an act or sign of idolatry. Something matters more to us than God. We desire, want, treasure, worship something in God's place. David White of Harvest USA says, "Sexual sin is not primarily about lust. . . . It is first and foremost a violation



of the first Great Commandment, an idol that replaces the Creator. This means in the face of frustration, loneliness, anxiety, stress, etc. the individual runs to a false god.”<sup>6</sup>

### WHAT PORN OFFERS AND HOW GOD OFFERS MORE

“It was a surface issue,” says Martin of his porn, “for deeper unresolved issues of sin.” David Powlison of the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation says,

It’s easy for your big, obvious sins (like surfing the Internet for pornographic material) to conceal the deeper sins that fuel your struggle with pornography. But unless you recognize and repent of the sin patterns underlying your addiction, you won’t be fighting the right battle.<sup>7</sup>

Asked for his advice to fellow strugglers, Ian says, “Focus on the reason why you look at porn. Discover why these reasons are empty, promising much but delivering little. Discover what the good news means for you in this respect.”

So what are the underlying promises of porn? We’re going to continue looking at six false promises of porn. Not every theme will be true for you, but most porn users will identify with one or two themes, and there will be some overlap. They’re a simplification to help you identify why you turn to porn and how you can turn from porn to God.

So with every false promise of porn there is a true promise of God. Whatever porn offers, God offers more. It’s this truth that sets us free (John 8:31-36). “In God’s mercy,” says Trevor, “he’s shown me that the promises of porn are hollow lies. In his incomprehensible sovereignty, God has used my weaknesses to make me cling to and rejoice in Christ—the fulfilment of all his promises.” “God is far more fulfilling than porn,” says Pete, “I’ve tried both and, as crazy as it sounds to someone neck-deep in using porn, God is way more satisfying.”

So our second key ingredient in the battle against porn, the central ingredient, is this: *an adoration of God—a desire for God arising from a confidence that he offers more than porn.*

Table 2. Second Key Ingredient in the Battle Against Porn

1	abhorrence of porn	a hatred of porn itself (not just the shame it brings) and a longing for change
2	adoration of God	a desire for God, arising from a confidence that he offers more than porn
3	assurance of grace	an assurance that you are loved by God and right with God through faith in the work of Jesus
4	avoidance of temptation	a commitment to do all in your power to avoid temptation, starting with controls on your computer
5	accountability to others	a community of Christians who are holding you accountable and supporting you in your struggle

### HOLLOW PROMISES, REAL PROMISES

#### *Porn Promises Respect.*

Porn creates a fantasy world in which I am potent. We use the word *potent* to describe both power and sexual ability. It shows how closely the two correlate in our minds and culture. Sexual prowess is a symbol of power. A sex addict, says Craig Lockwood, “thinks of his sexual performance, and the attractiveness of his body, as an indicator and a measure of his worth and adequacy.”<sup>8</sup> In my fantasy world I can perform. Indeed, I’m worshiped for my performance. Porn offers an opportunity to reimagine ourselves as sex gods worthy of respect. If porn offers you respect, then accompanying fantasies are likely to involve one or more of the following: increased staying power, situations in which you are dominant, better sexual performance than other people, an impressive body and multiple partners.

“For most men,” says Robert Jensen, “it starts with the soft voice that speaks to our deepest fear: That we aren’t man enough. . . . Sex is sexy because men are dominant and women are subordinate; power is eroticized.”<sup>9</sup> “The trigger for me is rejection,” says Brian. “I turn to porn when I lack confidence. Instead of seeking to fill myself with God, I believe that sin can fill me up.” “It made me feel excited and manly,” says Pete. Another Christian who’s struggled with porn put it like this:

This sense of unworthiness may drive someone to be the sort of person who looks very different from a sex addict. They may be outstanding performers in life: popular, good humored and successful people; leaders in church; businessmen; sporting achievers. But their successes are driven by the secret suspicion that no one would really like them if they were genuinely known by others for who they really are.<sup>10</sup>

This perhaps goes some way to explaining why porn is so often a problem for church leaders. Three factors combine. First, there is a pressure toward self-justification—to prove you're a good leader or worth your salary. Porn provides a fantasy world in which you're potent, adored, appreciated. It creates the illusion of self-justification. Second, this is coupled with maximum opportunity. Many men work all day and then spend their evenings surrounded by their family, so opportunities are limited. But church leaders are alone for large proportions of their week, sitting in front of high-speed Internet access. Porn is just a click away. Third, many church leaders feel unable to talk to anyone. People expect them to be examples of godliness. Many fear they'll lose their jobs if they tell anyone. Perhaps they will. And so they hide in the dark, and the dark is a breeding ground for porn.

One version of "porn as respect" is "porn as rejuvenation." For some men porn is part of a mid-life crisis. It's the secret version of an affair with a younger woman. It might be about the man feeling his mortality, or questioning his achievements in life, or feeling he no longer has a "perfect" body. And so we strike out for youth by "having" a younger woman. We enter a world where we and the objects of our sexual desire are young.

#### *God Is Glorious—He Is the One We Should Fear.*

In the fantasy world of porn, people respect me, admire me, accept me. Women "offer" themselves to me. I project myself onto the stud and vicariously experience his potency. I'm impressive, respected, worshiped by men. But it's all artificial.

God offers genuine acceptance. We're desperate to prove or justify ourselves, but we can't. We're not good enough, not man enough, not adequate enough—not for God. But God graciously accepts us in Christ, justifying us through Christ. We need the humility to accept—and the faith to find—confidence in Christ.

But perhaps the real issue is that God's acceptance is not enough. What we really want is the approval of other people, in this case often the approval of other men. In biblical terms, our porn is driven by the fear of man. The answer is the fear of the Lord. He is the glorious One, whose opinion should matter. And he's the One whose approval we already have in Christ.

#### *Porn Promises Relationship.*

We crave intimacy at a relational level. We feel lonely. But we also fear intimacy. We're not sure we can attain it or be vulnerable enough to handle it. "The sex addict learns to medicate this sense of isolation and unworthiness with pornography."<sup>11</sup> Porn offers a safe alternative to intimacy.

Porn provided the fantasy of an intimate yet passionate relationship. It seemed like a safe way to be sexually active without getting involved in a real relationship.

I used it because it made me feel less lonely. I tended to use live-camera chatrooms, where I could have a private conversation with someone who was pleased to see me and who would make me feel good.

Mostly, it satisfies for me a sense of acceptance and love. This isn't something I think about consciously, but I know it's the root issue.

It seems to provide a false intimacy—a woman showing you something that is private. Part of me feels lucky to have been allowed to see what I'm seeing.

It offers a deep sense of intimacy when I feel alone and overwhelmed. It takes a lot more work to talk to God, my wife or another person than it does to look at porn.

In “porn as respect” we want to be respected by men. In “porn as relationship” we want to be worshiped or desired by women. Accompanying fantasies may include some elements in common with “porn as respect” but with a focus on impressing women rather than outperforming men: a desirable body, staying power, multiple partners or multiple orgasms for your partner.

Or we want to be sovereign over women. We fear women, intimacy and losing control. Our fantasies don’t replicate the reality of our lives but offer a safe alternative. We enact what we lack the courage or ability to do in real life. We’re cowards who wish we were heroes. “It made me feel better about myself,” says Greg. “I had control. I could see a naked woman any time I wanted!” George says porn for him was about “having that sense of ownership over the woman.” And so we look at images in which the man is in control. Robert Jensen quotes a porn user who acknowledges:

For me, porn is all about *controlling human beings*, or I should say the illusion of controlling others. That’s what got me off. I felt so out of control in my life and from my childhood, that this was something I could control (which women I would see naked or I could hit the pause button and extend a particular image for eternity for example). There is no vulnerability, no risk, and therefore, no growth. I think that for me, the illusion of controlling women, even in masturbatory porn fantasies, was a misguided attempt to quell the fear that I have around women.<sup>12</sup>

Another form of this is viewing so-called lesbian sex. I say “so-called” because it doesn’t actually involve lesbians, nor is it designed for consumption by lesbians, but involves (usually otherwise heterosexual) women pleasuring each other for men to watch. This is risk-free intimacy. I’m not involved. Two women are available to me, but at no risk.

### *God Is Great—He Is Sovereign over Our Relationships.*

If “porn as respect” is driven by the fear of man, then “porn as relationship” is driven by the fear of woman (or the fear of man, if you’re a woman). Fearing rejection, we retreat into the fantasy world of porn in which women adore us and offer themselves to us without risk. But again, this is an artificial world.

Life is full of risk. Trusting God doesn’t take that risk away. People might still reject us. But trusting God takes some risks away. We can be confident that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). God will use the events of our life—including the failed relationships—to conform us “to the likeness of his Son” (Romans 8:29). And conformity to Christ is what matters most.

When we’re tempted to turn to porn, we need to think of God as our heavenly Father. We need to rest in his sovereign care, not replace it with a pretend sovereignty. We need to tell ourselves, “God is in control, and God is good to me.” “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7).

There’ll be times when you’re hurt by members of the opposite sex. There’ll be times when you are frustrated by your own fears. But don’t opt for a pretend intimacy.

### *Porn Promises Refuge.*

“Porn served as a stress reliever,” says Geoff, “when I should be relying on Christ as my source of rest and strength.” For many people, porn is a place of refuge. It’s a form of escapism to which they turn when they feel overwhelmed or defeated. “I use pornography mainly to escape responsibilities that seem too much for me to handle,” says George. He’s not alone. “Most often I went to porn when life or ministry got overwhelming. Porn became a means of escape.” “It’s escapism; I pretend I’m a different person, with a different life where I’m not in control and have no responsibilities.” “I use it to relieve frustration. It gives me a perfect world of sex. I feel strong, dominant. I don’t believe God is a better substitute.”



Perhaps you're facing a big, daunting task. Or perhaps you're facing a difficulty at work or in your marriage. Or perhaps you fear failure. Instead of taking responsibility, you turn to porn. You enter a fantasy world in which you're successful. Here's a world in which you're adored, in control, where success is guaranteed. "Porn is my own little world," says Oliver. Porn becomes the way we medicate our negative feelings rather than taking them to God.

The act of looking at porn is itself part of the succour it purports to offer. I can search for women who are all available to me. I can choose between them like some sovereign being. It offers a sense of control.

One specific version of this, albeit one that's less common, is where men want a dominatrix. Often, these are men with roles involving a high level of responsibility. The dominatrix offers them a complete abdication of responsibility. They can give up entirely any decision making and instead allow themselves to be told what to do. They leave behind the responsibilities of being the boss and choose temporary servitude.

Porn creates its own vicious circle. You turn to porn for refuge, and using porn gives you a brief high. But that's followed by a big low of shame and guilt, so you turn again to porn for refuge.

Gordon MacDonald identifies three cultural stereotypes that shape our sense of what it means to be a man:

- A real man is a hunter and provider: he fears failure.
- A real man is a stud: he fears rejection.
- A real man is a fighter: he fears powerlessness.<sup>13</sup>

It's not difficult to see how porn feeds off these cultural expectations. It creates a fantasy that perfectly matches each of these fears. If you fear failure, then porn promises success—you always get the woman. If you fear rejection, then porn promises approval—a woman worships you. If you fear powerlessness, then porn promises potency—women are under your power, whether they are overpowered by your sexual allure or, in more extreme porn, by your physical dominance.

### *God Is Great—He Is Sovereign over Our Lives.*

For some, porn is a place of refuge, an escape when life seems too much. Consider David's response to such pressures in Psalm 18:1-3:

I love you, O LORD, my strength.

The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;  
my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge.

He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my  
stronghold.

I call to the LORD, who is worthy of praise,  
and I am saved from my enemies.

David sang this song "when the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul." Was David under pressure! He was looking for an escape. So he turned to the Lord. He describes God as "my rock, my fortress, my deliverer, my refuge, my shield, my salvation, my stronghold." Find comfort in these descriptions of God.

David goes on to describe how God comes to his aid:

The earth trembled and quaked,

and the foundations of the mountains shook; . . .

He parted the heavens and came down; . . .

The LORD thundered from heaven,

the voice of the Most High resounded. (Psalm 18:7, 9, 13).

Here is someone more powerful than any of our circumstances. Think of the pressures you face—and then put them side by side in your mind with this thundering, fire-breathing God.

What does this powerful God do when he arrives?

He reached down from on high and took hold of me;  
he drew me out of deep waters.

He rescued me from my powerful enemy,  
from my foes, who were too strong for me.

They confronted me in the day of my disaster,  
but the LORD was my support.



He brought me out into a spacious place;  
he rescued me because he delighted in me. (Psalm 18:16-19)

God reaches down and holds us. He's there to support us. Imagine yourself lifted to that spacious place, delighting in God and enjoying his delight in you. Surely this is a far better place than the sordid, false world of porn!

Next time you're tempted to medicate your emotions with porn, take your problems to God. "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:6-7).

#### ***Porn Promises Reward.***

"It's a bit of well-deserved pleasure. I turn to porn instead of God because the short-term thrill is different to what God provides in that moment." "I used it as an escape from reality. Reality was good at the time, but I was restless and living a dull, uninteresting life." "Sometimes I felt I deserved it, especially if my wife was not in the mood. I loved the sensation, the high, the excitement."

It's common for porn users to turn to porn when life is dull or hard or disappointing. Or after deadlines, exams, preaching—after a period of intense work or self-denial. Porn is a reward: "I deserve this." There is often what Mark Laaser calls an "entitlement factor." Many men minimize the sin because they feel themselves overworked and underappreciated.<sup>14</sup> Have you found yourself thinking something like this: *I'm always doing things for other people, but no one does anything for me? Or I'm giving up stuff for Christ—a well-paid job or sex—so now it's my turn?*

#### ***God Is Good—He Is Our Ultimate and Lasting Joy.***

Many people turn to porn because it's pleasurable. Porn is a reward they've earned for their hard work. Or simply a quick fix. And porn is pleasurable and offers its pleasure quickly. But then what? Its legacy is emptiness, guilt, shame.

Jesus promises the Samaritan woman he met at the well living water that would truly satisfy (John 4). Then he asks her to fetch her husband. The words look like a strange tangent, but they lead straight to her heart. Jesus knows she's had five husbands, and the man she's with now is not her husband. This woman has been looking for meaning, satisfaction and fulfillment in marriage, sex and intimacy. But they're like water that leaves her thirsty again. No doubt there was pleasure. But it didn't last. It wasn't the real thing. It left her wanting more.

She tries to change the subject with a question about where we worship, but Jesus uses it to go right to the heart of the issue. What matters is not *where* you worship but *what* you worship. She was trying to find satisfaction from a man instead of from God and in the process made an idol of sexual intimacy. But the math tells the story: five husbands, plus another man. The math of your porn habit tells its own story as well. It shows what you've been looking to porn to provide, and it has not delivered.

To paraphrase John 4:13-14: "Everyone who drinks the water of porn will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water Jesus gives him will never thirst. Indeed, the water Jesus gives him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." This living water is God himself, communicated to his people through the Holy Spirit (John 7:37-39). Our longing for porn is a version of our longing for God. Susan says, "There've been times in my life when I've been so hungry for God that all I did was fast and pray with my friends—and utterly forgot about masturbating for about two years."

One of our problems is that we think only of moments. In the moment we think the pleasures of sin are real and the joy of God is insubstantial or distant. But in truth it's the other way round: every joy we experience is but a shadow of the source of all joy, which is God. C. S. Lewis famously said: "There have been times when I think we do not desire heaven; but more often I find myself wondering whether, in our heart of hearts, we have ever desired anything else. . . . It is the secret signature of each soul, the incommunicable and unappeasable want."<sup>15</sup> The life of obedience is not the bad life or a sad life. It's the

good life. Life with God and for God is the best life you could live. Change is about enjoying the freedom from sin and the delight in God that God gives to us through Jesus.

Boredom is a common reason cited for turning to porn. But is it really a reason? Consider this: why not turn to the Bible or prayer instead? OK, I'm not naive! I know the answer. The Bible and prayer don't seem much fun. Porn is easy pleasure. Reading Scripture and spending time in prayer are routes to true and lasting joy in Christ. But we don't take that path because we want quick and easy pleasure. In other words, boredom is not the issue, but laziness is. We want our pleasure now and we want it without any effort.

Or maybe the problem is that we don't really believe that the effort will be worthwhile. *So what if I read my Bible and pray for an hour? Is that really going to give me the buzz of porn?* We lack the faith to find joy in God. We opt for cheap pleasures over lasting pleasure because we lack faith. Compare this with Moses. Moses had access to all the luxuries of Egypt, but he gladly gave them up because he had faith in the treasure of Christ.

By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be ill-treated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. (Hebrews 11:24-26)

### ***Porn Promises Revenge.***

Porn can be an expression of anger, revenge, resentment or ingratitude. It may be an act against your wife, perhaps when sex is not forthcoming. Andy concedes he turns to porn "if I feel in any way hard done by my wife's provision of actual sex!" "The wife and I will argue," explains Bill, "and I'll let it fester, and when I'm on my own I'll let my eyes wander online." Tyrone says, "I used porn as an expression of my frustration that I wasn't having sex with my wife more

often. I thought on some level that it 'served her right' for not being more interested in me."

Or porn may be an act of anger against God, when life hasn't turned out the way we want. We might not have the honesty to say it out loud, but in our hearts we think, *If God is treating me like this then I don't see why I should bother with his ideals.* "I become frustrated with God," says Gordon, "that he's made me a sexual being and yet I have no allowed outlet for this part of who I am." Dr. Mark Laaser believes anger is a common reason Christian men commit sexual sin. "They are angry at God, angry at their spouse, angry at church," he says. "They feel abandoned."<sup>16</sup>

David Powlison describes counseling Tom, who had struggled with pornography since he was a teenager. He'd tried all the right things, but still he struggled. When Powlison asked him to keep a record of the times he was tempted, Tom said, "I already know when. It's usually on Friday night. It's my temper tantrum with God." On Friday nights, Tom thinks of his friends out on dates or with their wives. "I feel sorry for myself. I get angry at God because I think he owes me a wife." "I thought his big struggle was with pornography," comments Powlison, "but all of a sudden he was talking about anger at God! . . . Tom was a legalist. He believed that when he tried to be a good Christian God owed him goodies (such as a wife), and when he did something wrong he despaired."<sup>17</sup>

### ***God Is Gracious—He Gives Us More Than We Deserve.***

In some ways "porn as revenge" is a version of "porn as reward." We can think that we deserve porn because of what we've endured or given up. The twist with "porn as revenge" is that we feel someone isn't giving us what we deserve. We're angry with our wives for not giving us the sex we want. Or we're angry with God for not giving us the life we want. Indeed, anger toward our wives reflects an unspoken—perhaps unrecognized—anger at God for not giving us the wife or the sex we want.

It reflects a contractual view of our relationship with God. We

do things for God or we give up things for God and we have a right to certain blessings in return. If God doesn't deliver on his side of the bargain, we're justified in no longer keeping our side. We have a right to be angry toward God and a right to take revenge: a right to porn.

But God doesn't treat us on a contractual basis. He treats us according to grace. He doesn't give us what we deserve: he gives us more than we deserve. He gives us what Christ deserves. In a sense God does treat us on the basis of a contract—the covenant he makes with his people through the blood of Christ. But this is a covenant of grace. What we deserve from God is his wrath, but what we get is the righteousness of Christ.

A contractual view of God is the attitude of the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son. "He answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends' " (Luke 15:29). He's angry because he doesn't think that his work has been rewarded. But the heart of the issue is revealed in the phrase "all these years I've been slaving for you." He thinks of himself as a slave rather than a son. "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours'" (v. 31).

Do you think of yourself as a slave of God? Then no wonder you turn to porn in anger to get what you think you deserve. But we're not God's slaves. We're his sons and daughters. If God doesn't give us the partner or the sex or the success we long for, it's because he knows best because he has a bigger agenda, because he's making us like his Son, because he wants us to long for the real treasure of knowing him. Marriage or sex or success has become an idol in our hearts. When we can't have it, we feel bitter toward God, because it matters more to us than God. God is prying our fingers away from it so we can grasp hold of him and the greater treasure that is already ours in Christ. You may not have a spouse or great sex or success or a lot of other things. But you do have the living God. "My son, my daughter, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours."

### *Porn Promises Redemption.*

For some people, porn offers redemption, in terms of acceptance and affirmation, an alternative righteousness. "I just want to feel that I'm OK. I turn to porn instead of God because the gospel doesn't tell me that I'm OK. It tells me I'm a wicked sinner and Jesus died in my place. The gospel demands that I change. Porn says, 'You're OK just as you are.'" "Why not God? Time with God is laden with all sorts of complicated emotions and thoughts, and doesn't evoke the same strength of 'lift.'"

For others porn offers a form of redemption through self-atonement. Porn is the punishment they inflict on themselves to redeem themselves. In "porn as revenge," my anger is directed against God or my wife. But in "porn as redemption" my anger is directed against myself. I feel a strong sense of self-loathing and turn to porn to confirm this verdict. "I turn to porn instead of God," says Kurt, "because often I feel God has rejected me." I play the shameful role I assign to myself. It becomes an act of self-harm akin to taking a sharp object to your arm. "I guess I had a very distorted view of God at the time. I felt like I had to tick lots of boxes to make myself presentable to God, and I knew I had nothing good within me. Porn was a way of escaping from God, in a sense, but it only made me feel worse."

Pastor Rob Bell says:

Lust always wants more. Which is why lust, over time, will always lead to despair. Which will always lead to anger. . . . Sometimes it isn't expressed on the outside because it turns inwards. That's depression. When it goes outward, it will often affect what a person indulges in—darker and darker expressions of unfulfilled desire mixed with contempt. Is that how someone ends up at leather and whips?<sup>18</sup>

This is anger at self, but it's also pride toward God. I'm too proud to accept his pardoning grace. I need to self-atone. And so I wallow in self-pity and self-loathing. If this is how porn works for you, then you'll hate porn but still need it. It provides something for you—a



sense of redemption, of self-atonement. It confirms your verdict on yourself and enacts judgment against your guilty self.

*God Is Gracious—He Is the One Who Atones for Our Sin.*

I waited patiently for the LORD;  
 he turned to me and heard my cry.  
 He lifted me out of the slimy pit,  
 out of the mud and mire;  
 he set my feet on a rock  
 and gave me a firm place to stand.  
 He put a new song in my mouth,  
 a hymn of praise to our God. (Psalm 40:1-3)

Porn is a window onto your heart. It's where you go when left to yourself. But God is gracious. We don't have to remain in the pit of porn. We can look to God to lift us out, to give us a firm place, a good place, with a new song. We don't have to wallow in self-pity—we can sing hymns of praise to our God.

Don't choose the pit. Don't let porn shape your identity. God calls us his sons and daughters. Trust the finished work of Christ, who died to give you a new life. When you're tempted to wallow in porn, remember this: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). Your old identity has been crucified; it's dead and gone. Its habits of thought and behavior may linger on, but it no longer defines you. You can embrace a new life, lived by faith in the Son of God. You're loved. And this is the measure of Christ's love for you: he gave himself for you.

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his foot-

stool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. (Hebrews 10:11-14)

The priests offered sacrifices again and again because they could never atone for sin. Perhaps that's how you feel: day in, day out, you must atone for your sin. Again and again you must suffer: wallowing in porn, harming yourself with destructive behavior. But Jesus our great High Priest has "offered for all time one sacrifice for sin." And then he sat down—a sign that his work was done. "It is finished." There's nothing left to do. Christ has paid the price of your porn in full. "By one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy." You're being made holy, and perhaps you feel keenly the ongoing strain of your sin. But in God's sight you're perfect, through the perfect work of Christ. Listen to Peter's testimony:

I knew I'd earned condemnation and guilt. When I finally saw Jesus taking that guilt on himself for me I was horrified and amazed that he would do that for me. I came to understand his love in a way I'd never have known had I not been so lost and needy for salvation. My struggle with porn caused me to re-evaluate the legalistic, graceless God of my youth.

## THE FIGHT OF FAITH

"I don't want Jesus to break the cycle of porn," Bob told me, "because I'm afraid Jesus will be a poor substitute." Bob is not alone.

I use it instead of turning to God because it's so readily available, and in that moment God doesn't seem to be near, even though I know he is.

I turn to it because it appeals more to my senses than God does in those moments. It feels like it has more power over me than God in those moments.

The only reason I didn't turn to God instead was that I didn't



believe he was really satisfying and complete for what I need. I believed the lies of Genesis 3 all over again.

It is easier to turn to porn than God.

Let no one suggest that turning from the false promises of porn to the promise of God is easy. Faith in Jesus is not a quick fix. It's certainly not a case of "just believe." There's no "just" about it. Yes, the message is "believe." But it's never "just believe." We're called to the fight of faith. So instead of "just believe," the message is "fight to believe." And it will be a fight, a daily fight. Some days you'll be wounded; some days you'll lose the battle. Then you'll have to pick yourself up, fight to believe in God's grace and reenter the fray.

Ron says, "I remind myself that porn will not make me happy and fulfill me but just make me feel more empty. I remind myself that Christ fulfills. He is better and leads to more joy. I just don't have enough strength, sometimes." That's biblical realism. There's the fight to believe that Christ fulfills; that Christ is better than porn. And sometimes we lose the fight. But the battle goes on. How did change take place for Pete? "I 'manned' up! I realized the depravity of it all in light of a higher, weightier gospel. I believed in the promises of God more than the promises of porn."

This is why so many people speak of turning to porn when they're tired. It's not because they think porn will be a pick-me-up—otherwise they'd make themselves a coffee instead. It's because they don't feel they have the energy for the fight of faith. It requires discipline. George says, "The temptations will come when I'm feeling down and tired. However, through rejoicing in the gospel at the start of each day, I'm winning the fight." It's when we're tired that more than ever we need companions—other Christians to stand with us in the fight and, above all, the Holy Spirit to energize us to hold onto the greater promises of God.

I was presenting some seminars on the struggle with porn at the Keswick Convention in the Lake District in the United Kingdom. During a break I climbed the mountain Skiddaw with a friend, ap-

proaching the summit from the steeper west side. It was hard work! The final push is across loose rock at a forty-five-degree angle. Each step is agony. The calves are aching as you try to lift your weight on tired legs. It feels like a form of torture—and this is what we do for leisure! So why do we do it? Why don't we just give up? Because we're confident that the view from the top will make all the effort seem worthwhile. And so it was, for me and my friend.

This is a great picture of the way we're sanctified by faith. Sometimes it can be agony. Each step is hard work. You feel like giving up. But you press on, because faith tells you that the view from the top will be glorious. Legalism would make you climb the slope by berating you or beating you down. And if you've ever tried climbing a mountain with reluctant children, you'll know that that approach doesn't work very well. At best you might get them up one mountain, but you'll not get them up a second! The gospel gets you up the mountain by promising you a glorious view from the top. The path is no less hard, but there's a spring in your step as you anticipate what's coming. Faith is fixing your eyes on the mountain top. Every now and then you can turn round and get a glimpse of the glorious view, just as we experience more of God the more we know him and serve him. And those glimpses are a foretaste of what's to come: the mountain top of God's eternal glory.

## PORN AS SELF-WORSHIP

The false promises of porn are the sin behind the sin of porn. But there's one more layer to unravel. There's something that lurks even behind the lies of porn. Underlying all these false promises is the desire to be worshiped. One of the participants in my research described porn as "a worship disorder."

One of the common characteristics of porn is that women readily express pleasure. "I like to see the pleasure and ecstasy on her face as she lets herself go," says Karl. Even in softcore porn, the woman looks into the camera with "come-on" eyes. The very act of posing is designed to communicate that she is there for you. "Porn is a lie," says

Geoff. “It teaches a man that he is desired by the most beautiful woman on earth.”

At the heart of porn is self-worship. Here is a world in which people worship me. I project myself onto the stud in the film and imagine women crying out to me in adoration. I’m worshiped for my potency and power. Jack says, “I guess I dream of being some sort of stud that can make all women happy.”

When you view porn, you can move from image to image, and each woman is there for you, offering herself to you. They all want you, and you can choose between them. Not only are you adored, but you have sovereign power. “Porn gives me power,” acknowledges Tyrone. “I can choose the body of my sexual ‘partner.’ I can find porn in which they will do anything I can think of. It’s really the worship of myself, trying to convince myself I’m powerful and irresistible.” Carl Trueman comments:

In its virtual elimination of the body, the computer world offers users the potential (albeit illusory) of transcending their bodily limitations. On Facebook, I can be anybody I want to be: an eighteen year old Californian with a six-pack, good teeth, a sun tan and a pilot’s license; or even a 25 year old blonde beauty queen from North Carolina with a degree in astrophysics. I can become the ultimate in self-created beings. . . . In virtual world . . . I can be anyone I choose to be. I am the Creator; or at least, I have the potential to think I am.<sup>19</sup>

Or consider an explanation from another porn user: “I use porn because my spouse doesn’t have a rampant desire to fulfill needs.” Why isn’t it enough for our spouse to be willing to have sex with us? That would be enough to celebrate and reinforce our love. But, no, that’s not enough. She must have a “rampant desire.” Why? Because what I long for is to be worshiped. I want my sexual partner to simmer before me, overcome with desire, under my sexual power. But I’m not a sex god, and my wife just wants ordinary sex. In fact, she may just want a cuddle. But that’s not enough—I demand to be worshiped.

And so I turn instead to porn, because in porn every woman I see worships me.

Porn promises big time but fails to deliver every time. It promises intimacy comfort, relief. It delivers loneliness, pain, guilt. I suppose I worship myself. It’s getting what I want, when I want it, how I want it. I’m in control. So I turn to porn instead of God because it means I can remain proud, I can remain in control, I don’t have to humble myself.

### REPENTANCE: TURNING FROM SELF TO WORSHIP GOD

We become Christians through faith and repentance. We continue and grow by ongoing faith and repentance. And this means that we counter porn through faith and repentance. Battling porn with faith means embracing the truth about God in place of the false promises of porn. Battling porn with repentance means turning from self to worship God.

When tempted to use porn, remind yourself that it’s a temptation to self-worship. We need a fundamental shift of orientation. We need to move from acting as if “It’s all about me” to acting as if “It’s all about you, Lord.”

This begins with adoration. Our second ingredient in the battle against porn is *an adoration of God—a desire for God arising from a confidence that he offers more than porn*. Instead of self-worship, we must worship God. Consider his merits, his worth, his glory, his beauty, his kindness, his grace, his majesty, his holiness, his power. So who will you worship today?

Call yourself away from yourself—from selfishness—to self-denial and service. With every false promise of porn there is not only a gospel promise, but a corresponding gospel virtue. Call yourself to action: to commitment, to responsibility, to service, to patience, to humility, to glory. There is joy to be found in doing the right thing. It’s time to be a man (if you are a man!). We’ve seen that porn offers potency. It makes us feel manly. But here’s where we can be *truly*

manly—when we take responsibility, when we battle, when we find comrades to fight with us.

Table 3. Turning from the Promises of Porn to the Adoration of God

Promise of Porn	Typical Context	Faith in God	Gospel Virtue
respect	inadequacy and fear of rejection	God is glorious—he is the one we should fear	Call yourself to pursue God's glory
relationship	fear of intimacy and risk	God is great—he is sovereign over our relationships	Call yourself to commitment
refuge	hardship and fear of failure	God is great—he is sovereign over our lives	Call yourself to responsibility
reward	boredom and sacrifice	God is good—he is our ultimate and lasting joy	Call yourself to service
revenge	frustration and anger	God is gracious—he gives us more than we deserve	Call yourself to patience
redemption	guilt and self-loathing	God is gracious—he is the one who atones for our sin	Call yourself to humility

## DIAGNOSIS

The diagnostic chart in table 3 summarizes what we've seen. Not all of it will apply to you. It's designed to help you identify the roots of your porn habit. Where are you on this chart? What remedy does it suggest for your porn habit?

## FIGHTING PLEASURE WITH GREATER PLEASURE

Porn is a sin of the imagination. We need to counter it by enlarging our imaginations. The answer to porn is to believe the truth. But that's so much more than an intellectual process. We need to let the truth capture our imaginations: to meditate, ponder, wonder at and sing the truth. We need to feel the truth, glory in the truth, delight in the truth. Discipline yourself to start each day by cultivating your affections for God. Remind yourself of Christ's goodness, glory, grace and greatness until your heart is warmed again

by those truths and Christ is supreme in your heart. "Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life" (Proverbs 4:23 NLT).

One Christian who's struggled with porn concludes:

Modern conservative evangelicalism fuels sex addiction because it has come to focus on the externals of religion, not the affections. By externals I mean such things as confessions, dogmas, personal priorities, church growth strategies, church attendance, training courses, evangelism, Bible study groups and so on: things that are visible in a believer's life. By affections, I mean those things that cannot be heard or seen directly—fears, loves, joys, delights, hates, anxieties: the currents that swirl in the waters of a believer's heart; the hidden desires that lie deep beneath our decisions. . . . If we are going to help people struggling with sex addiction, we need to recognize that the manger in which their sin is cradled is not the intellect, but the heart, the seat of their desires. They therefore need something more than mere information: they need to be wooed by the true and pure lover that their heart secretly seeks.<sup>20</sup>

Jesus offers living water. Battling porn in our lives is not an exercise in denying pleasure. It's about fighting pleasure with greater pleasure.

The fire of lust's pleasures must be fought with the fire of God's pleasures. If we try to fight the fire of lust with prohibitions and threats alone—even the terrible warnings of Jesus—we will fail. We must fight it with a massive promise of superior happiness. We must swallow up the little flicker of lust's pleasure in the conflagration of holy satisfaction.<sup>21</sup>

We don't need to say to ourselves, "I should not use porn." The good news is that we can say to ourselves, "I don't *need* to use porn, because God is bigger and better."