

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 re-enter the fray.

Ron says, 'I remind myself that porn will not make me happy and fulfil me but just make me feel more empty. I remind myself that Christ fulfils. 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 fulfils; 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 UK. During a break, I climbed the mountain Skiddaw with a friend, approaching the summit from the steeper west side. It was hard work! The final push is across loose rock at a 45-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 worth while. 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 worshipped. 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 worshipped 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.¹⁹

Or consider an explanation from another porn user: ‘I use porn because my spouse doesn’t have a rampant desire to fulfil 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



worshipped. I want my sexual partner to simper 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 worshipped. 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.

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.



Table 3

The 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

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,

fears, 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.²⁰

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.²¹

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.'