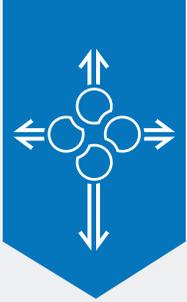


A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF LUST AND PORNOGRAPHY

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A Free Sermon Series for Pastors
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INTRODUCTION

Truthfully, I've never been much of a fan of "canned sermons." Most pastors I know don't like them either. They are justifiably skeptical of another person's research and exegesis. Every pastor's presentation style is different.

However, preaching about lust or pornography in many churches can be difficult. There are many good questions pastors should ask about how to effectively preach on these topics.

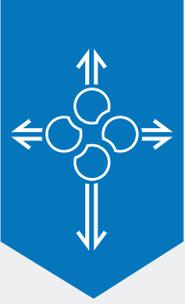
This book is a sampling of three chapters from the Covenant Eyes publication, *Porn-Free Church: Raising up gospel communities to destroy secret sins*. They were originally written as sermons, based on the book of Proverbs.

I wrote these chapters for two reasons. I believe there is need for pastors to talk about the temptations of lust and pornography in ways that are (1) exegetically sound, and (2) experientially helpful. If the statistics are any indication, there are likely many who worship in your congregation who are fighting lust, tooth and nail, and are habitually losing the battle. They desperately need to hear that the Word of God not only "gets" their struggle, but that the gospel offers solutions and hope.

The information here is based on years of research about the insidious nature of Internet pornography and the people it ensnares. I hope these chapters spark ideas for you, giving you a place to start. Preach them as they are. Adapt them. Take points you like and leave out others you don't.

I pray that as you preach, truth will set your people free.

With you in the fight,
Luke Gilkerson
Covenant Eyes



IDOLIZED

SEVEN REASONS WHY GUYS LIKE PORN

Why are men drawn to pornography? It isn't merely because they like looking at naked women. For many guys the draw to pornography can become compulsive.

As disciple-makers and teachers we bear the responsibility of not only using the Word of God to expose the evils of sexual immorality out there in the world, but also allowing the Word of God to expose the evils in the hearts of our own people. Despite the fact that we can preach about porn as addictive, relationship-destroying, and an injustice to women, the fact of the matter is this: Men still like it. We can wag a finger at the purveyors of sexual media, the advertisers, the traffickers, and of course the vile porn industry itself. But no matter what we say about the harms caused by the “supply” side, the fact is men—even Christian men—are a part of the “demand” side. Despite what guys know about porn, we still like to look at it.

Here is the beginning of a testimony from a man brave enough to share his story:

I was around the age of 10 when I discovered something the others hadn't. It was something that finally gave me the attention I had been craving, the affection I'd felt I was missing, and it provided me a feeling of adequacy I yearned for. Pornography.

Initially, I found it almost melodramatic. While I had heard about it, I'd never seen any before. As I think back on it I can remember exactly where I found it, exactly how it was folded, and sadly enough, I can remember the picture on the front in enough detail it makes my heart ache. It's the damage of images that cannot be unseen. This small experience was the first step in aligning myself with a lifestyle that would hijack huge chunks of my life for the next 20-plus years.

Internally, I was hooked. The attention I craved came from the women staring back at me from those pages. No girl I knew in real life would look at me like that. So

comforting and so accepting. They didn't judge me; they loved me for who I was. This was my special world and I had decided for me that I was going to do all I could to keep it a secret from everyone.

As my time with pornography continued into my middle-teen years I began to progress with a collection of more magazines, and further to videos if given that chance. Pornography had become a constant vehicle in my life. With the discovery of masturbation, pornography merely became a means to an end. With the onset and proliferation of computers and the Internet, I never stood a chance resisting it and the instances of looking at and using pornography increased exponentially. My compulsion for pornography opened the door (acting as a catalyst) for easy justification for anything and everything.

Of course the details are different from guy to guy, but in the end, it is this kind of raw honesty we want ourselves and the men in our church to embrace. And like a mirror, we who disciple others should use the Word of God to expose the evil that thrives in our shabby hearts.

THE VIEW FROM SOLOMON'S WINDOW (PROVERBS 7)

My son, keep my words and treasure up my commandments with you;
keep my commandments and live;
keep my teaching as the apple of your eye;
bind them on your fingers; write them on the tablet of your heart.
Say to wisdom, "You are my sister," and call insight your intimate friend,
to keep you from the forbidden woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words.
For at the window of my house I have looked out through my lattice,
and I have seen among the simple, I have perceived among the youths, a young man
lacking sense,
passing along the street near her corner, taking the road to her house
in the twilight, in the evening, at the time of night and darkness.
And behold, the woman meets him, dressed as a prostitute, wily of heart.
She is loud and wayward; her feet do not stay at home;
now in the street, now in the market, and at every corner she lies in wait.
She seizes him and kisses him, and with bold face she says to him,
"I had to offer sacrifices, and today I have paid my vows;
so now I have come out to meet you, to seek you eagerly, and I have found you.
I have spread my couch with coverings, colored linens from Egyptian linen;

I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon.
Come, let us take our fill of love till morning; let us delight ourselves with love.
For my husband is not at home; he has gone on a long journey;
he took a bag of money with him; at full moon he will come home.”
With much seductive speech she persuades him;
with her smooth talk she compels him.
All at once he follows her, as an ox goes to the slaughter, or as a stag is caught fast
till an arrow pierces its liver; as a bird rushes into a snare; he does not know that it
will cost him his life.
And now, O sons, listen to me, and be attentive to the words of my mouth.
Let not your heart turn aside to her ways; do not stray into her paths,
for many a victim has she laid low, and all her slain are a mighty throng.
Her house is the way to Sheol, going down to the chambers of death.

The story is a fairly simple one to follow. Solomon is glancing out his window, looking down on the streets of Jerusalem, and he sees an ignorant young kid walking down the street at night. He comes across a seductive woman who entices him to come home with her. Adultery ensues.

This text reveals to the reader the crafty ploys of this seductive woman. Solomon is giving his reader both a literal and metaphorical birds-eye-view of the situation. It's like watching the suspense movie where you, the viewer, know who the bad guy is, you know where he's hiding, and you know what's up his sleeve, but the unsuspecting victim does not know. If the characters on-screen only knew what you knew, they wouldn't fall into the deadly trap.

That's the view Solomon is giving us. He wants his readers to first see this temptation through the safety of his window so that when they find themselves on the same street on a dark night they aren't falling into the same traps.

This sexual encounter is no accident. Solomon says this woman is “wily of heart.” The Hebrew expression literally means “guarded,” indicating she has secret strategies that she holds close to her. She has a plan, a scheme. She has premeditated this encounter.

This story—and the lures the woman uses to get the man in bed with her—offer some startling parallels with modern men and modern pornography.

LURE #1: PHYSICAL LUST

The first lure, physical lust, is the most directly observable temptation. Solomon states that she is “dressed as a prostitute” (Prov. 7:10). This woman is dressed to kill. She is seductive.

This is the most obvious, in-your-face reason why men are drawn to pornography. Men like to look at naked women, plain and simple.

Men have a God-given sex drive. When a man is attuned to a woman’s form, when he sees a sensual image, or when he fantasizes, this triggers a reflexive release of testosterone in his body and his brain begins to cultivate a desire for sex.

Of course, it is important to remember this sex drive is created by God. When we read the creation account in the book of Genesis, what is the apex of the physical creation? After creating the moon and stars, plants and animals, and the garden of paradise, the pinnacle of the physical creation is the woman. God forms Eve and brings her to Adam, and as they stand naked before each other, he erupts with a poem packed with anticipation and excitement: “This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.” It is then God calls his creation not just good but very good.

But when sin entered the picture it changed the way we relate to the created world. Paul comments in Romans 1, as we look at the visible created world our minds should perceive the invisible God. We should notice His eternal power and divine nature, and then as we perceive Him we should be moved to honor and worship Him as the immortal God. But instead, Paul says, we are always exchanging “the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things” (Rom. 1:23). This is idolatry.

Notice what Paul says is our chief problem: we have a worship disorder. Our hearts should be captured with the glory of the immortal God, but instead we become fixated on images of created things. And among all the created things, the image of a woman’s body often ranks at #1 for men. Man’s natural draw to a woman’s beauty becomes twisted, and we make images of women our god—the things that truly captivate us and capture our imaginations.

This is what pornography does. Pornographers are basically modern day idol-makers, only their material is not wood or stone, but pixels on a monitor. Their

chisels are camera angles, lighting, makeup, and clever photo and video editing. And as we take these idols into our hearts (Ezek. 14:3) we commit the sin of lust.

LURE #2: PASSIVE PLEASURE

“She seizes him and kisses him, and with bold face she says to him...” (Prov. 7:13)

This is the woman’s very first move. No words: just an in-your-face sensual embrace, telling him everything he wants to hear with her body language and her gaze. What message is she sending this man? She is easy, vulnerable, and eager. He can have her with no commitment or work on his part. He merely has to follow her home; she will do all the rest.

This is another key reason why guys like porn. The actresses in every digital harem are eager and willing; a man just has to find them (not a difficult thing to do today). This is the lure of passive pleasure.

To want the embrace of a woman is a good desire. To desire sexual pleasure is not itself an evil. God has set up the institution of marriage for the expression of sexual pleasure. Go back only a couple chapters in Proverbs and we read Solomon encouraging the reader to “rejoice in the wife of your youth” (5:18). God calls men not to seek sex, per se, but rather to cultivate the virtues of a godly husband and become a man of character.

But our sexual drive is not neutral. Like everything in our psychological make-up, our sex drive is stained with sin. We have a bent toward passive pleasure, not loving commitment. Godly marriage involves commitment, pursuit, intentionality, romance, love, and respect. Marriage is about taking care of someone other than yourself. Lust involves none of this. This is why pornography is so alluring to some men. Like a lot of temptations, pornography offers a quick fix, a shortcut to pleasure without virtue. Pornography rips sexual pleasure from its relational context and creates a realm of fantasy.

It enables a man to feel like a man without requiring him to be one.

LURE #3: ESCAPE

“I had to offer sacrifices, and today I have paid my vows...I have spread my couch with coverings, colored linens from Egyptian linen.” (Prov. 7:14,16)

These are the very first words out of her mouth. The word “sacrifices” is the word used throughout the Old Testament for fellowship offerings: animal sacrifices presented and slaughtered at God’s altar, with a portion given back to the worshipper for them to eat. It was usually eaten that day among friends and family. These were the choicest cuts of meat. She’s effectively saying to this man, “I have a table with the best foods spread at my house right now.”

In verse 16 she continues by describing her couch. Usually people in that culture would recline to eat, and she is describing a special seat reserved for him at her table, covered with expensive, exquisite cloth imported from Egypt. This was the luxury bedding of Solomon’s day. She has spared no expense for him. She is inviting him into an experience of comfort, ease, and delight.

For many men, pornography is their place of comfort, their refuge, their escape. For some this is a conscious thing: they justify spending hours and hours looking at pornography because it is their “treat”—the way they wind down or take a break. They “owe it to themselves.” For some this is a subconscious motivation: not even realizing it they run to pornography again and again because it is a fantasy world where all the arrangements have been made for them, a world where they can forget their worries, dissatisfaction, and discontent.

The world is full of hardships and difficulties, and when we encounter them something in us justifiably revolts. Something in us longs to return to Eden, before the curse and decay of sin entered human existence. We long for the comforts of Paradise. The gospel tells us there is a day coming when there will be a new heaven and a new earth, when Paradise will be restored to us, when there will be harmony between us and God, harmony among one another, and harmony in creation. The Spirit of God also offers foretastes of this ultimate hope: He whets our appetite for heaven. But when we face the stress of the world’s fallen conditions, our sinful hearts don’t retreat to that hope. Instead, we retreat by making temporary Edens, small paradises that we can control, paradises centered not around God but rather centered on ourselves.

This is another reason why porn is so alluring: it gives us a ready-made fantasy world into which we can escape.

LURE #4: SECRECY

“For my husband is not at home; he has gone on a long journey; he took a bag of money with him; at full moon he will come home.” (Prov. 7:19-20)

She informs him that her husband has gone on a business trip and isn't expected to return until the next full moon. In other words, she is saying, "Don't worry. There is no fear of getting caught."

Often porn is enticing because of its secrecy. Pornography thrives on secrecy.

Psychologist Al Cooper noted this when he coined the phrase "Triple-A Engine" to describe Internet pornography and cyber-sex addiction. According to Cooper, people are drawn to porn because it is (1) Affordable, (2) Accessible, and (3) Anonymous.

AFFORDABLE—porn is relatively cheap or free online.

ACCESSIBLE—the Internet brings pornography right into the private corners of your home or office at high speeds.

ANONYMOUS—no one has to know that you see it; it is secretive.

It's been said, "True character is who you are when nobody's looking." We let our true colors shine when nobody else sees what we're doing. This applies to the good as well as the bad. Jesus said if you want to pray, fast, or give to the poor from a pure heart, then do these things when no one is looking except your Father in heaven (Matt. 6). Then, He says, you will receive the true lasting reward of doing them. This is living with truly godly character and integrity.

To use the old Latin phrase, we must live *coram Deo*, "before the face of God." We are to live our lives conscious of God's presence, omniscience, and all-penetrating gaze. *Coram Deo* means we not only know but also supremely care that God always sees us, that God is sovereign. There is nothing hidden from His sight, and knowing this utterly transforms how we live.

The Internet, home computers, and smartphones have brought this issue to the forefront like nothing else before them. As more and more of us live detached, anonymous lives online, we get a glimpse at what really motivates us, what really makes us tick. Behind closed doors our real motivations surface. Before the age of the Internet, many Christians might have avoided the trap of pornography merely in conformity to Christian social norms. Today, the option of secrecy opens a wide door of temptation.

The anonymity of the Internet has exposed something deep in our hearts, a deeply rooted belief that there is a piece of life that we can totally have as our

own, a territory that we can rule outside of God's sovereign gaze, a small kingdom of our own where we can play by our own rules. But in order to live in this deception, we need secrecy. We desire the anonymity because exposure shatters the illusion that our decisions affect no one else but us.

LURE #5: PRIDE

Notice how she plays this guy. "I have come out to meet you, to seek you eagerly, and I have found you" (Prov. 7:15). She probably would have said the same thing to the next guy who came along, but she insists that he's the one and only. She makes him feel desired, wanted, and attractive. Solomon crystallizes this so well when he says: "With much seductive speech she persuades him; with her smooth [i.e. flattering] talk she compels him" (7:21).

Today we might say she is stroking his ego. She is playing to his pride. This is the same ploy used in pornography today: to catch the man up in the fantasy experience where he is the main character. The woman on the screen is selling the lie: she wants him, she notices him.

For many guys, physical lust is not the only thing driving their fixation on pornography, masturbation, and fantasy. It's also motivated by pride or self-worship. The fantasy world is like a film playing in their minds. When they fantasize they cast their latest crush as the leading lady in the movie in their minds-eye. But the woman is not the main character, is she? He is the main character, producer, and director, all in one. The lady reads the script he wants her to read. In the movie of his mind, the plot is all about him, and she is merely the supporting actress. The fantasy is about how irresistible he is and how she makes him feel about himself.

This, again, is idolatry. One of the reasons why porn is so powerful is because it reinforces our sinful desire to worship ourselves.

LURE #6: FALSE INTIMACY

"Come, let us take our fill of love till morning." (Prov. 7:18)

What a wonderful phrase for a husband to hear from his wife, and yet here it is found in the mouth of an adulteress.

She speaks of the “love” they will enjoy all night long. The Hebrew word, *dowd*, translated here as “love,” is used many, many times in Solomon’s celebrated love poem, the Song of Solomon. It is used as the pet name between the two lovers: “my Beloved.” It is also used to refer to the affectionate, passionate love they share:

How beautiful is your love, my sister, my bride! How much better is your love than wine, and the fragrance of your oils than any spice! Your lips drip nectar, my bride; honey and milk are under your tongue; the fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon (Song of Solomon 4:10-11).

This sort of love describes the physical and verbal foreplay between Solomon and his bride before making love.

The forbidden woman is playing on this same deep motivation for love. This is what pornography offers a man. Pornography seeks to tap into a deep part of us that desires closeness and then creates parody of it. Porn is false intimacy.

A lot of single guys have a dreaded fear of being alone. They want to experience love and intimacy. Even married guys experience this, especially if their marriage is not all they hoped it would be.

Of course we were created for intimacy. It is a part of our make-up as God’s creatures. But in our sin-soaked hearts, this desire becomes an idolatrous demand. To the man who desires companionship more than God’s glory, being alone is his hell. To save himself from this hell, the porn girls in his fantasies become his saviors. But as we bring our twisted desires to Christ and make them subservient to His glory, then and only then do we begin getting a taste of intimacy the way it was meant to be.

LURE #7: THE FORBIDDEN

Solomon describes the adultress as “the forbidden woman” (7:5). The word carries the idea of someone who is foreign or a stranger. She belongs to someone else. She is not his. It’s not just that she is an attractive woman: she is an illicit woman. She is off-limits.

This is exactly what our sinful nature does: we crave what we can’t have. The Bible calls this covetousness. Paul spoke about this in Romans 7:

[I]f it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me (Rom. 7:7-11).

Follow Paul’s logic here. First, Paul speaks about the principle of sin in the members of his body: a drive that lives his bones, something that compels him to live autonomously, to disobey God. Second, he speaks of God’s law. He specifically mentions the tenth commandment: You shall not covet. What happens when this sinful drive in him meets God’s law?

It was as if covetous desire was laying dormant in Paul—asleep, dead. Then the command about coveting brought his sin to life, arousing the sleeping giant. The command, of course, promises life to those who walk in it (Deut. 5:33), but our sinful drives within actually use the command to stir up more lust. Knowing something is off-limits kicks lust into overdrive and produces what Paul calls “all kinds of covetousness.” This is one more reason why this foolish young man follows her home: she is forbidden, and his sinful heart wants what it should not have.

A few chapters later Solomon sums up the motto of Lady Folly: “Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant” (Prov. 9:13). This is why “the other woman” pulls at a man’s heart. Pornography gives a man the feeling that he has been given the key to the back door of forbidden pleasures.

MY SON, KEEP MY WORDS...

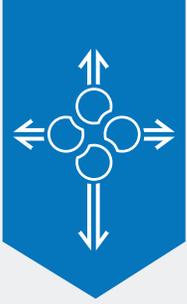
This is the view from Solomon’s window. From Solomon’s vantage point, he can see this young fool walking into the deadly trap. Solomon offers us more than just a birds-eye-view of this man marching into temptation. Solomon gives us a glimpse into this man’s heart.

Seven lures pull this man into the seductress’ home. He is enticed by her physical beauty and sexual prowess. He is captivated by her forwardness and the promise

of sexual pleasure without personal commitment or cost. He is charmed by the promise of escape from the busy Jerusalem streets. He is tempted by the allure of secrecy: knowing no one will know of his sexual escapade. He is puffed up with pride thinking about her apparent desire for him. He is moved by his desire for intimacy and longs for her bed chamber. And his heart is grabbed by the thought of being able to experience forbidden pleasure.

For any man who has ever dabbled in pornography, these are some of the same lures he has felt tugging at his own heart.

Thankfully, Solomon nor the rest of the Biblical authors leave us—the foolish, easily tempted men—without help. On the contrary, the gospel awakens in us greater affections that can trump and replace the lures of pornography.



LEARNING

WISE AND PRACTICAL STEPS TO FREEDOM

Preachers and disciple makers often straddle theological tensions when giving advice: rebuke and comfort, faith and obedience, reliance on God and responsible choices. We walk these tensions not only because different situations dictate different calls to action, but because the Bible itself is filled with these sorts of delightful tensions.

When it comes to counseling and preaching about the iron grip of pornography, it is easy to become “reductionistic” in our approach. Some of us err on the side of simple pragmatism: freedom from sin is formulaic and all the advice is nuts-and-bolts information. This approach believes freedom from unhealthy behavior is the highest end: the bottom-line is “quitting pornography.” Advice coming from this camp stresses reliance on new habits of action: bounce your eyes, get this Internet filter, throw out the porno magazines, get accountability partners you can call on in the time of temptation.

Others err on the side of ivory-tower-theology, preaching the glories of Christ and the gospel, stressing the need for internal change but in a way that seems inaccessible to the one in the trenches. This approach understands (rightly) that overall heart-change is the goal: the bottom line is the gospel of grace penetrating the deepest parts of us and making us into lovers of God. They tell others the reason they love porn is because they haven’t been consumed by the revelation of the gospel: God’s hatred for sin and offer of justification to the sinner. A supernatural work is needed to awaken us to the greater pleasures of God. But to the person who is wandering in the wilderness of sin, lost in a fog of confusion, this goal sounds more like the Promised Land they will never enter. What can be done in the here and now that gives me a foretaste of this freedom?

How do we point to the high water mark of deep and lasting change, while at the same time not lose people who just want to hear some baby steps to freedom?

BACK TO PROVERBS 7: THE WAY OF WISDOM

Chapter 4 of this book looks at seven common lures that often rope men into the trap of pornography. Solomon watches from his lattice to see a young man foolishly marching down the dark alley of temptation. This young man walks straight into the arms of an adulteress.

What is this young man's problem? Solomon answers that he lacks wisdom. What this young fool needs is to see the view from Solomon's window. Here is Solomon's answer to all of us would-be fools:

My son, keep my words and treasure up my commandments with you; keep my commandments and live; keep my teaching as the apple of your eye; bind them on your fingers; write them on the tablet of your heart. Say to wisdom, "You are my sister," and call insight your intimate friend. To keep you from the forbidden woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words (Prov. 7:1-5).

The biblical idea of wisdom essentially refers to skillful living—the ability to make right choices. As we glance through the Proverbs we see wisdom is not just book knowledge. It is street smarts—practical and fruitful understanding based on the experience of generations. Wisdom, for Solomon, is not merely something that involves mental discernment. Wisdom is also moral skill. It's both knowing what is best and knowing why it is best, thus having the godly motivation to choose it.

Solomon understands sexual temptation is a matter of persuasion. "With much seductive speech she persuades him" (7:21), he writes. That phrase, "seductive speech," has also been translated "persuasive words." Solomon uses the exact same term in the Proverbs to refer to the precepts and teachings he gives to his readers (4:2). In other words, persuasion cuts both ways. One can use persuasion to move someone to good or evil, life or death. You will either be persuaded by the world to sin or by wisdom to godliness.

In Proverbs 7 there are at least four things that mark the path of wisdom, and offer uncomplicated (though not easy), practical steps for the one struggling with pornography.

First, think soberly about the consequences.

Second, repent of pursuing tempting paths.

Third, pay attention to your heart.

And last, walk with the wise.

THINK SOBERLY ABOUT THE CONSEQUENCES.

“Her house is the way to *Sheol*, going down to the chambers of death.” (Prov. 7:27)

Sheol in Hebrew writings is the grave or realm of the dead. Here Solomon is using vivid language to describe the final consequence of lust. Actually, Solomon is playing on words: the man on the street is going to her bed chamber, but really it is a chamber leading to death.

What sort of death does Solomon mean? Is this just hyperbole or something much more serious?

At the very least Solomon is talking about a ruined life. He writes, “As an ox goes to the slaughter, or as a stag is caught fast till an arrow pierces its liver...he does not know that it will cost him his life” (7:22-23). In Hebrew thinking, the liver was thought to be the seat of our passions and feelings. Solomon is using some irony. It was this young man’s passions and emotions that led him into the snare, and now a deadly arrow is lodged in the place where lust began. Solomon says that those who go down this path of sin will suffer great pangs of conscience and inner corruption—death in the heart.

When we speak of the subject of pornography we could form a line of people many miles long who could give one testimony after another about how lust started small for them but led to more costly decisions. We could talk to men who eventually ended up addicted, ruining their relationships, or who went thousands of dollars into debt in order to satisfy their lusts. We could talk to men who know the incredible pain of sexual brokenness. We could talk to the fiancés and wives whose relationships have ended because of pornography. We could talk to thousands of men who ended up in sexual perversions they never thought they would do. “Many a victim has she laid low, and all her slain are a mighty throng” (Prov. 7:26).

And yet for the men in your church—in every church—there is the propensity to believe they are the exception to the rule. Yes, lust and pornography have cost some people dearly. But not me, they think. Reality check: There are no

exceptions. The same arrow aimed at the liver of the foolish man in Proverbs 7 is still sharp and is aimed at the hearts of every man with a pulse. Yes, sin takes its toll on all of us in different ways. Yes, consequences are different for each person. But dabbling in porn always leads to some sort of death. Period.

More importantly, Jesus said there are eternal consequences to lust.

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell (Matt. 5:27-29).

Jesus raises the moral stakes of lust to eternity. Solomon’s example is of a man and a woman who commit literal adultery. This is a hell-worthy act. But Jesus says that merely looking at someone with lustful intent is worthy of the same fiery punishment.

Jesus’ statement in Matthew 5 warrants a close look. Notice, he is not saying that all people who lust go to hell. If that were the case, you would be hard-pressed to find anyone in heaven at all. He is speaking to sinners whose eyes have caused them to lust, people who are already guilty of heart-adultery. His warning to them and to us is that you are in danger of hell if you do not fight your lust. He says those who will face the fires of hell are those who harbored lust in their hearts and did nothing radical about it.

To some Christians this warning rings hollow. After all, if we believe we are saved, if we believe we have been forgiven of all our sins—past, present, and future—then maybe we think this warning does not apply to us. It only applies to other people, right? But remember: in Matthew 5 Jesus is talking to His disciples. He’s speaking to the church. He’s not addressing merely the outsider. He’s saying to the church that they must take lust seriously. If we don’t, we may stand before Christ some day, spiritual resumé in hand, only to hear the fateful words, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness” (Matt. 7:23).

Paul writes to the church using similar terms in 1 Corinthians 6.

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who

practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Cor 6:9-11).

Paul is not talking about incidents of sin. We all have those. He's talking about unchecked habits of sin—lifestyles of sin. Apparently, there were some in the church at Corinth who got the idea that you could claim to be forgiven of sin and still practice sin. Paul's warning to them was stern: Do not be deceived. Those who make a practice of sexual sin will not inherit the kingdom of God. Period.

This sober warning is meant to bring the disciples of Jesus to their knees. Not only are we to consider the seriousness of sin and the death that it brings, we are meant to ask ourselves the hard question: Do I belong to Christ? Does the Spirit of Christ live in me (Rom. 8:9), enabling and obligating me to put to death the transgressions of the body (8:13)? This is ultimately what it means to be a son of God—what it means to be led by the Spirit (8:14).

We don't fight sin in order to be saved. We fight sin because we are already saved. But when the fight isn't in us, we should be asking whether the Spirit is either.

We are meant to read the words of Solomon and have some sobriety knocked into us. "Her house is the way to Sheol, going down to the chambers of death." Pornography leads to emotional death, relational death, spiritual death, and eventually eternal death. When the girl beckons to us from the other side of the computer screen, do we hear these sobering words ringing in our ears?

REPENT OF PURSUING THE TEMPTING PATHS

"Do not stray into her paths." (Prov. 7:25)

Solomon is saying: Don't be like this fool I saw out my window. Don't stray down the path to her home, "passing along the street near her corner, taking the road to her house in the twilight, in the evening, at the time of night and darkness" (7:8-9). This was not a casual evening stroll for the young fool. It was an intentional movement in the direction of temptation. In fact, it could actually be translated that he "marched" down her street. In the darkness of twilight this man is walking quite deliberately toward her house.

Christian musician Rich Mullins tells a similar story. He said for several years he traveled by himself and found that it was too tempting to not watch the porn movies in hotel rooms, so he made a personal commitment to never travel alone. One night he was in Amsterdam, famous for its Red Light District. He says he was in his hotel at night, waiting to hear his friend start snoring so he could be sure he was asleep. He thought, “Maybe it would just be fun to take a walk and be tempted.” He never heard his friend snore that night, and in the early morning hours he finally gave up out of sheer exhaustion.¹

How seriously do you treat sin? The more we understand why sin is such an affront to God, the more the idea of playing with temptation will seem detestable to us. If we just want to be moralistic, we can look at behaviors that pertain to sexuality and draw arbitrary lines: “Okay, these sorts of activities break the rules, and these other ones do not.” When I have this attitude then I can easily justify the grey areas, places where I allow myself to dance on the edge of the cliff as long as I don’t fall in. This is moralistic thinking divorced from a true Godward orientation of the heart.

But that’s not the wisdom of Solomon. The wise man does not draw the line at the doorstep of the harlot so he can relish in the idea of being tempted. He draws the line at the end of the street because he hates sin. For Solomon, this is where real wisdom begins: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10a) and the “hatred of evil.” (Prov. 8:13).

When Solomon uses the term *yir’ah*, translated “fear,” it is a worship term that captures the idea of both shrinking back in terror and drawing close in amazement. It is a disposition of the heart that both dreads and draws. Solomon says this disposition is the controlling principle of living a wise life. To be wise, we must first have our worship right. We must rightly fear God, stand in awe of him, and in doing so hate the things that rob him of glory and rob us of our joy in Him.

When we fear God we don’t just know where the lines between good and evil are, we come to hate evil because God hates it. Paul would say it this way: “Make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (Rom. 13:14), and “sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you” (Eph. 5:3).

1. That was the night he wrote the lyrics to one of his better-known songs, “Hold Me Jesus.” Knowing this story brings the words of Mullins’ song to life even more: “I wake up in the night and feel the dark / It’s so hot inside my soul / I swear there must be blisters on my heart / So hold me Jesus, ‘cause I’m shaking like a leaf / You have been King of my glory / Won’t You be my Prince of Peace.”

When it comes to pornography, we must not just repent of looking at it, we must also honor the holy God by repenting of our yearning to be tempted by it. For those in your church, this means they must begin to identify with the paths leading to the forbidden woman and repent of flirting with those paths. It is a different stumbling block for each of us: a time of day or night; a certain place; a certain computer; being hungry, angry, lonely, or tired. We must take note of these tempting paths and repent of pursuing them.

Again I ask: How serious do we treat sin? The real problem for many men who face pornography temptation is that the temptation is a part of the whole experience. They revel in getting close to the edge. They make seemingly unimportant decisions that bring them one step closer to the object of lust. They tell themselves, “I’m just going to check my e-mail,” or “I’m just going to see who’s online,” or “I’m just checking my Facebook newsfeed.” Deep down, part of them actually hopes to encounter the temptation.

This attitude of wanting to get close to the edge is itself a sin because it is treating lightly something God hates. It is totally void of the fear of the Lord, of true worship. When we see this attitude rise up in us, we need to recognize that we have already started facing the wrong direction. Men in your church need to be trained to redraw the battle lines. There at the head of her street we have a choice: will we turn around to redirect our worship to God and honor His lordship, or will we walk by her house and choose to be entertained by our idol?

PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR HEART

“And now, O sons, listen to me, and be attentive to the words of my mouth. Let not your heart turn aside to her ways.” (Prov. 7:24-25)

Solomon’s focus is on the heart. The heart walks down the path of temptation long before the feet do.

The “heart” is mentioned over 70 times in the book of Proverbs. It is a word that refers to the seat of our appetites, our knowledge, our emotions, anxieties, joys, furies, bitterness, passions, plans, motives, inclinations, and our will. The heart is our whole inner person.

Solomon knows the heart is the source of all our plans and actions. A signature verse from the book of Proverbs highlights the centrality of the heart: “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life” (4:23). With all

vigilance—that is, with diligence, above all else, more than anything—guard your inner life, your heart, because it is the wellspring of all you say and do.

What does it mean to guard your heart? For starters, it simply means to notice. We must first notice when our hearts begin to act like the fool. We must train our minds to recognize when the lures of lust start to pull at us, and train those you disciple to notice the lures that regularly capture their hearts.

When we find ourselves drawn to physical lust, when our eyes lead us astray, we need to learn how to bounce our eyes away and then bounce our thoughts toward the worship of God. When we find our minds easily conjuring up fantasies, we must quickly see this and guard our hearts from them.

Are we drawn to the passive pleasure fantasy affords us? Are we cultivating godly character that moves us toward the romancing and nurturing of one woman in marriage, or have we retreated to the quick fix of adolescent fantasy? Often before we can repent of pornography we must first repent of our passivity. Some of us must learn what Paul commanded: “know how to take a wife for yourself in holiness and honor” (1 Thess. 4:3-8, RSV). For married men this means we must pursue our wives. For single men this means we must learn how to pursue a woman for marriage (or embrace a call to singleness that Paul writes of in 1 Corinthians 7:8-9).

When we find our hearts looking for an escape or a refuge from life, we must notice it and throw ourselves upon God as our refuge before our hearts retreat to some false Eden. We must come face to face with the things deep in our hearts that drive us to want an escape, face our discontentment and bring it before our Father.

When we are drawn by the lure of secrecy and anonymity we must remember and believe with all our hearts that God always sees us, that we live our lives before His face. We must repent of the belief that we can make some part of life completely our own, outside of God’s sovereign control.

When we find our hearts and minds drawn to the fantasy world where all attention is on us, where our pride can flourish, we must actively repent of that attitude and remember that God alone is worthy of that sort of attention. We also must remember that when we make Him central, when we trade self-obsession for God-obsession, His affirmation of us as His children will satisfy us in a way no human affirmation ever can.

When we find our hearts drawn to the false intimacy of pornography, let us pursue real intimacy with Christ, family, and Christian community. This may mean examining all the habits we have created that isolate us from others and making some radical changes. This may mean cultivating that prayer life we've always longed to have. This may mean getting involved in church or a small group where we can know and be truly known. This may mean admitting our isolationism to those who are closest to us and asking for their help.

When we find our hearts drawn to covetousness, drawn to the forbidden nature of pornography, we must stop and recognize this for the sin that it is. Instead of merely fighting this urge with moralism and rules, we must be captured by a better vision, a greater desire. Instead of merely saying to ourselves, "Don't touch that. Don't look at that"—which lacks any power to restrain our indulgence (see Col. 2:20-23)—say instead, "I set my mind on the pleasures at God's right hand. Without Christ I would be shut out from these pleasures forever. But Christ is now my life, and when He appears I will appear with Him in glory" (see Col. 3:1-4).

The good news for those ensnared by porn is this: despite our sinful heart, Christ has promised a new heart to those who trust in Him. This is one of the great and radical promises of the New Covenant ratified by Christ, that God Himself actually writes His laws on our hearts, planting the desire to obey Him into our desires (Jer. 31:33; Gal. 5:16-17). If you are united to Christ, if Christ's Spirit is in you, this is what God has done in you.

The very desire to repent is a gift of the Spirit within. It is His work in your heart.

WALK WITH THE WISE

"My son, keep my words...O sons, listen to me." (Prov. 7:1,24)

This phrase "my son" is found many, many times in the book of Proverbs, because the whole book is an address from father to son, from teacher to pupil, from master to student. This adds a personal touch to the whole book. Proverbs is not just a classroom textbook. It is an extension of Solomon himself to those he loves.

Why would Solomon write this way? It is because he knew that wisdom isn't merely taught. It's caught. Wisdom isn't something we learn in a vacuum. It is imparted to us in community, not by text on a page but by living examples.

Proverbs 13:20 says, “Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.” God’s path of maturity in the Christian life is the path of discipleship. Wise character comes from walking with the wise. This is why we need one another. We need close and wise friends who eagerly follow Christ and urge us to walk in godliness and grace.

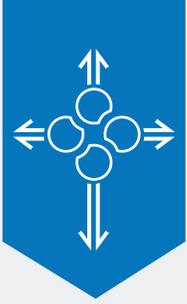
One of the elements of Solomon’s story of the naïve youth that is often overlooked is this: one of his great follies is that he is walking alone. We must guard our hearts, to be sure. But we must also allow others to do the same for us. In Proverbs 20:5 Solomon begins saying, “The purpose in a man’s heart is like deep water.” How much our own experience testifies to this! Isn’t it true that many times you have no idea what your real motives are, what’s lurking deep within you? Our hearts are like deep water: we cannot see to the bottom. But Solomon finishes the proverb: “The purpose in a man’s heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out.”

Solomon is telling the fools and the would-be fools to find “men of understanding” to guide them, to help them. For those struggling with pornography in your church, they must understand they cannot find freedom in an isolated vacuum. Someone must guide them to find men of understanding, to find a close, wise friend, or a group of close, wise friends who can walk alongside them and help them to discern what really makes them tick. With skillful questions and probing thoughts, a man of understanding can drop a bucket deep into our hearts and draws out observations about ourselves which we are afraid to admit, even things we have never noticed before. A man of understanding thinks deeper than just what you said or did. He knows how to probe beneath the surface. He is one who really knows you and how to counsel you.

The words “My son” call the preacher and the leaders of a local church to step out from behind the pulpit to offer more than their words of wisdom. The words “My son” remind us the church is a family, and like all families, proper growth cannot happen without real parenting. To the church at Thessalonica, Paul likened himself to “a nursing mother taking care of her own children” (1 Thess. 2:7), and “a father with his children” (2:11) who exhorted and encouraged them to live in a manner worthy of God.

Paul knew preaching was not enough. He was not content to simply preach to the Thessalonians: “We were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us” (2:8). I’ll say it again: When it comes to growth in the Christian life, preaching is not enough.

For the long haul, the path to freedom from porn is found in biblical community: accountability, mentoring, and discipleship. Your church must learn the beauty of mutual confession of sin and fervent prayer that brings healing to our sick hearts (James 5:16). We must learn what it means to find those in the church who draw us near to God and, with intentionality and thoughtfulness, stir us up to live holy lives (Hebrews 10:24-25). And when we feel trapped in the sin of lust, we must learn the joy of being restored by spiritually mature leaders (Gal. 6:1).



BEYOND THE SUPERFICIAL

CREATING FRIENDSHIPS WITH SUBSTANCE

When it comes to Greek mythology, the stories of the Sirens were a favorite among sailors in the Mediterranean. The Sirens were divine beings: captivating and beautiful women with bird-like wings. These creatures perched themselves on a series of small islands somewhere off the coast of Italy. There they sat, not too far from the rocky cliffs, resting in a flowery meadow. What made the Sirens so enchanting were their voices, their song. Ancient sources describe their “siren song”—a beautiful music that would compulsively lure sailors toward the island, only to have their ships capsize on the rocks.

One famous story about the Sirens is found in Homer’s *The Odyssey*. Odysseus, one of the champions of the Trojan War, is making the long journey home with his band of sailors. He is counseled by one of the goddesses to beware of the sweetness of the siren song. She says to him, “There is a great heap of dead men’s bones lying all around the Sirens, with the flesh still rotting off them.”

Taking her advice, Odysseus devises a plan to avoid the Siren’s trap. First he plugs the ears of all his fellow sailors with wax. Then he commands his men to bind him upright to the mast of the ship. He tells them further, “If I beg and pray you to set me free, then bind me more tightly still.”

As Odysseus’ ship sails within an earshot of the islands, suddenly the wind falls into a dead calm. The Sirens see Odysseus coming and begin singing. “Come here,” they sing, “No one ever sailed past us without staying to hear the enchanting sweetness of our song.” Immediately Odysseus is caught in their spell. He is overcome by the song and demands his men to set him free. But his men bind him with stronger ropes until they are out of the Sirens’ range, and the trap is avoided.

The Sirens still sing today. It may not be the same for each man in your church, but make no mistake about it: we are all enticed by things of the world. Every

man encounters temptation. Your Siren might be the lure of lust, or greed, or selfishness, or pride, or fear of man, or anger. We have those vices that just seem to grab at our hearts and easily ensnare us (Heb. 12:1). The question isn't whether we encounter temptations. The question is whether we will face them alone. Odysseus needed his men for more than just manning the ship. He needed men who were willing to help him fight temptation, to fight sin.

REAL FRIENDSHIP, REAL BROTHERHOOD

Every man in your church must ask himself who his fellow sailors are. Who's on their boat? Who are they really living life with? Who are they close to? It is often a problem, especially among men, that we don't intentionally seek out good friendships. Often we don't seek out wise counsel unless we are seeking "expert" advice. It is easier to stay on the surface with our so-called friends, and as such they are not friends who help us fight sin.

The Bible has a lot to say about real friendship or real brotherhood. The word "friend" means different things to different people, especially in the Facebook-culture in which we live. The word "friend" in a social network world means "anyone who clicked the 'accept' button." A friend on Facebook can be that guy who used to sit behind me in seventh grade math class that I haven't seen in 20 years. Even outside of the online world, if you ask people how many friends they have, some might say, "Oh, I have dozens," or "Hundreds of friends."

But the book of Proverbs offers us this warning: "A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother" (Prov. 18:24). Friendship is more than being a mere acquaintance. If your friendship circle is a mile wide and an inch deep, you may think you have good friendships, but you don't have any true brothers. It is possible to feel all alone in a crowd.

This is what we all want: a friend that sticks closer than a brother. That's a rare jewel. It is a great blessing to have those people who have been with you through all of life's ebbs and flows, someone who knows how you tick, someone who is there for you in good times and bad.

Good friends aren't just close friends, according to Solomon's proverbs. They must also be wise friends. "Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm" (Prov. 13:20). Some of the men in our churches may have some very close friends, but are they wise friends? Do these friendships make them wiser, or do they reflect more of the world's values?

Exploring the book of Proverbs we find seven qualities (at least) of being and finding a good friend.

1. GOOD BROTHERS ARE DEPENDABLE. BAD ONES ARE FAIR-WEATHER FRIENDS.

“A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity” (Prov. 17:17). The word love here is the same word to describe the love between Jonathan and King David (Solomon’s father): He loved David as he loved his own soul (1 Sam. 20:17). This is close friendship.

But a friend doesn’t just love in the fair-weather times: a friend loves at all times. A friend is dependable and loyal. He’s there for you when life falls apart. In fact, Solomon says, this is what brotherhood was born for: times of adversity. This is why God gives us good friends. Some of the men in your church have gone through hard times...really hard. And often it is in those hard times we find out who our real friends are. Something in our life fell apart: a marriage ended, we lost a job, we had a death in the family, or we were physically harmed. It was at that time that a good friend stayed by our side when things were worst, and we felt as if that friendship was born for that moment. Some of the men in your church know this proverb to be true from bitter experience, and yet many feel so isolated they only wish they had a story of adversity where a friend came through for them.

Or consider this proverb: “What is desired in a man is steadfast love, and a poor man is better than a liar” (Prov. 19:22). Solomon is saying, what people really want to see in a friend is steadfast, unfailing love. The Hebrew word used here is *hesed*, and it means “radical loyalty.” It is the same loyalty that God is said to have for his covenant people: a steadfast love that endures forever. When he says a poor man is better than a liar, he’s saying even a faithful friend who has nothing is better than a man of wealth who says he’s faithful and then turns his back on you.

This is what people want in a friend: someone who reflects God’s character of loyalty, and sticks with you.

2. GOOD BROTHERS ARE HONEST ABOUT THEIR SIN. BAD BROTHERS HIDE IT.

“Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy” (Prov. 28:13). This means friends confess sin to each other. Friends are accountable to one another.

Accountability is a buzzword in the Christian community, especially among men. But in order to do accountability well, we need to know what it is.

Here’s a good definition of accountability: Accountability is being honest with trusted friends about our temptations, our sins, and the state of our heart.

There are all kinds of games guys play when it comes to avoiding real accountability. For some it’s sheer avoidance. Some men are really good at just never getting into discussions about personal sin. They keep things on the surface. When their friends start getting personal, they just shut up or plead The Fifth.

Others play the “We” game. They might get into a conversation with their Christian brothers about a struggle they have and end up couching everything in “we” terms. “You know how it is when we are really tired or stressed out and we’re hanging out online, and we see a picture of a hot girl, and we just sort of click on it without thinking about it? Sometimes we just don’t have our defenses up.” That is not a confession. That’s a homily. Instead, they should start their sentences with “I.” “I have a problem.” “I shouldn’t do that.” “I was wrong.” “I sinned when...”

Some men keep their confessions at surface level. They tell someone just enough to soothe their consciences but heavily edit and sanitize their stories.

Some confess their sin to others but play the “elapsed-time-game.” They do something they know is wrong and want to confess it to someone, but they make sure to put a good week or so between the sin and the confession. That way, they can build up a nice track record of behavior so their sin seems somehow less significant. “I gave into temptation, yes, but I’ve really been staying strong for the last 6 days or so.”

Some people are really sly: they play “musical chairs” with their accountability partners. They have more than one person they confess their junk to, so no one

person really has the whole picture of how bad they are. They rotate through accountability partners, treating people like confessional booths.

These games are deception—they are ways we bend the truth so we don't have to be brutally honest with anyone. Men in our churches who do this care more about personal image than honesty.

As church leaders we should be challenging our men to crucify their image to go deeper with their friendships. Are they willing to give and receive honest confessions? Are they willing to pursue brother-to-brother accountability?

Where I work, at Covenant Eyes, we hear hundreds of stories from men who have experienced this sort of freedom in confession as they use our Accountability software. These guys have the Covenant Eyes program on every computer or handheld device they own, and on a weekly basis a good friend or a group of friends receives their Accountability Report of everywhere they've been online. As you can imagine, it totally changes the way they use the Web. They think twice about everywhere they visit, every link they click on. More than this, when they do go to a questionable website they've already put the measure of honesty in place: there's no getting around it. When their partner gets a report that says at 2:37 a.m. on Tuesday they looked up "Sexy college girls" on Google, there's no room for ambiguity. They can use this report to begin having an honest conversation.

Remember what Paul said. "Each of us will give an account of himself to God" (Rom. 14:12), Christians included. Someday we will stand before the One whose eyes are like fire, who sees everything inside us, and we can't cloak our sin in front of Him. Yes, if we are united with Christ we will enter into the full blessings of eternal life, but we will give an account all the same. And right now, brother-to-brother accountability is like a dress rehearsal for that great Day. We drag our sin into the light before a safe brother because we know that someday all of it will be exposed to the light anyway.

3. GOOD BROTHERS ARE CONFIDENTIAL. BAD BROTHERS ARE GOSSIPS.

Proverbs 16:28 says, "A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends."

After all we've said about confession, we need brothers we can depend on, brothers who will be confidential with the information we give them.

Solomon advises here: Don't be close friends with a gossip. In 1 Timothy 5:13 these people are called busybodies, people who just like to be in the know, who like to be up on what's happening in your life, who like to talk to others about everyone else's business. Some people just want to be close to you to be close to information about you.

Confidentiality is vital for true brothers. It is so important, it should be a stated agreement between you and your accountability brother: we will not share private information with anyone else.

For some people, this is the biggest hang-up for getting close to someone else. Maybe they've been burned in the past. Maybe someone they know has been burned. They just don't know if they can trust anyone.

As a disciple maker, you can affirm the suspicions of some of the men in your church. Yes, people are sinful. Yes, people can let you down. Yes, you can unwisely give your trust to someone who breaks it. But the critical question is whether you trust Christ as you pursue deep friendships. Say to yourself, "Despite my fears, I choose to believe that God has placed me into a redeemed family—the church—among people who are being changed from the inside out, and as I pray for discernment, God will guide me into relationships with brothers with whom I can be completely honest."

4. GOOD BROTHERS LOVINGLY CONFRONT. BAD BROTHERS ARE SPIRITUAL WIMPS.

A wise brother confronts our sin. "Faithful are the wounds of a friend, profuse are the kisses of an enemy" (Prov. 27:6).

Men must be taught to avoid the extreme of wimpy accountability. You may have had accountability relationships like this. You get together and confess your latest blunder. Your friend confesses his sin too. You pat each other on the back, say everything will be okay, and go home just as unmotivated as before to really do something about your sin. You get back together the next week with the same sad story.

In these sorts of friendships all we're looking for is absolution. We just want to commiserate with someone over our sin and get something off our chest. We just want to have someone tell us our sins are forgiven. Of course, it isn't a bad thing to want an affirming word. We should be reminding one another of the grace of

Christ and His forgiveness. But a good brother wisely knows that we don't need cheap peace or cheap grace.

When a friend wounds your pride, it's not intended to harm you, but to heal you. When you need a new heart, you don't need a pharmacist to give you pain medication that masks the problem; you need a heart surgeon to cut you open. Does being rebuked hurt? You bet. But it's a wound worth receiving.

Remember this proverb: "Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another" (Prov. 27:17). How does iron sharpen iron? With friction. Sparks might fly. But in the end, the blade is sharper. Real friends are willing to risk some friction with you because they love you more than winning a popularity contest. They don't shy away from the hard conversation. They wisely know how to confront a sin they see in your life without condemning you. A wise friend expects change in your life and in your character.

C.S. Lewis wisely said, "You will not find the warrior, the poet, the philosopher or the Christian by staring in his eyes as if he were your mistress: better fight beside him, read with him, argue with him, pray with him." We need to be brothers who fight sin together.

That being said...

5. GOOD BROTHERS KNOW WHEN TO CUT YOU SLACK. BAD BROTHERS HAVE A "COP MENTALITY."

Proverbs 17:9 states, "Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends." True friends know how to pick their battles. Sometimes accountability partners can bring a cop mentality into their friendships. They are nit-picky. Like Proverbs 17:9, they repeat your sins back to you over and over again. They don't let stuff go. They point out every little thing they see that's wrong with you. It seems like they are out to get you.

One story from Nate Larkin's book, *Samson and the Pirate Monks*, illustrates this:

You've probably seen that poor fellow who decided one day to be honest in a Christian meeting. Maybe he'd been caught in a sin, so he really had nothing left to lose, or perhaps he was so plagued by guilt that he decided to take the church's

rhetoric about grace and forgiveness at face value and bare his soul in a desperate bid for freedom.

I remember a guy who did that. As soon as the fateful words were uttered he looked around, hoping somebody would say, “Me too,” but all he heard were crickets. After a pause, a curious investigator launched into spiritual cross-examination. Then a few concerned “ex-sinners” gathered around him and preached a series of sermons disguised as prayers. Finally, a helpful brother prescribed three Scripture verses to be taken in the morning and at bedtime. Later, the guy was assigned a probation officer—excuse me, an “accountability partner”—who would check in on him for a few weeks to make sure he had actually turned around. [...]

To make matters worse, as he left the meeting that poor guy was struck by the realization that he had just volunteered to become the church’s new topic of conversation. Suddenly he knew that telephone lines were already humming with the latest “prayer request.” Next Sunday, his suspicions were confirmed. The sidelong glances, the awkward silences, the careful distances kept by his former associates, their wives, and others, verified that his disclosure was now common currency in the congregation.

This men’s group did not understand the meaning of the words, “Whoever covers an offense seeks love.” Sometimes love is better served by silence. Sometimes what we need is empathy, not a sermon.

A cop is someone who is just looking over your shoulder for you to screw up. We don’t need any more accountability cops in the church. Christians have come up with some very religious and sanitized ways of being a jerk. But a real friend isn’t someone who merely polices your life. Good accountability partners are fellow travelers, not cops. A real friend is someone who gets in the vehicle with you, helps you drive in the lines, travels with you in life in good times and bad, helps you look out for the potholes, helps you read the road signs, and helps you get to where you are going.

A good friend learns how to balance both confrontation and compassion, persistence and patience.

6. GOOD BROTHERS ARE REALISTS. BAD BROTHERS ARE FOOLISHLY CHEERY.

“Whoever sings songs to a heavy heart is like one who takes off a garment on a cold day, and like vinegar on soda” (Prov. 25:20).

Perhaps you have had this kind of a friend. They think they are bringing you joy, but they are depriving you of the warmth you need. These friends are as worthless as vinegar neutralized by washing soda:

THE LOOK-ON-THE-BRIGHT-SIDE GUY: You tell him you’ve just lost your job and he says, “Well, at least you have your health.” Thanks.

THE CLASS-CLOWN GUY: There’s not a serious moment with him. You tell him something serious and he cracks a joke in the name of good fun.

THE SUPER-SPIRITUAL GUY: Confess some struggle you’re having and all he can say is, “Well, praise God in all circumstances,” and walks away whistling his favorite hymn. Again, thanks.

Of course, good friends don’t want you to stay in the muck of depression, but this proverb is about the superficial, sing-songy friend who glosses over your heavy heart.

I’ve mentioned the wimpy accountability partner and the legalistic accountability partner; but this is the cheery accountability partner. We don’t need a wimp; we need someone who lovingly confronts us in our sin. We don’t need a legalistic cop; we need someone who is compassionate and patient. And we also don’t need an eternal optimist; we need a realist. A realist is someone who knows there is more to life than just feeling good. If feeling good is all we need, then foolish optimism is the best medicine. But a real brother wants us to be good, not just feel good. He doesn’t want to put a colorful Band-Aid over an open wound. Instead he wants to help you dress it.

This leads to the last point . . .

7. GOOD BROTHERS FOCUS ON YOUR HEART. BAD BROTHERS SEE ONLY THE SURFACE.

“The purpose in a man’s heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out” (Prov. 20:5). As I mentioned in Chapter 7, this proverb speaks of the

depths of the human heart. Why do we do what we do? What really motivates us deep down? Why are we tempted by this thing or that thing? What makes a sin so attractive? Where does our anger come from? Our fears? Our cravings? Our lusts? Our hearts are like deep water. Look all you want, you cannot see the bottom.

But a man of understanding is someone who helps you discern the motives of your heart. A man of understanding thinks deeper than just what you said or did. He knows how to probe beneath the surface. He not only seeks God's wisdom, he seeks to know you.

What is a "man of understanding" like? The book of Proverbs says we identify these wise friends by how they live.

A man of understanding...

- ▶ knows when he lacks wisdom. He seeks understanding diligently. He is always a student of human nature and divine truth (Prov. 2:3).
- ▶ doesn't slander, deride, or use rash words. He knows how to hold his tongue. He's quick to listen and slow to speak (Prov. 11:12; 17:27).
- ▶ doesn't find humor in the things God calls folly. He finds pleasure in wise living (Prov. 10:23; 15:21).
- ▶ is patient, not quick-tempered (Prov. 14:29).

As a church leader, start taking note of the men in your church you believe meet this description and call them aside to challenge them to build genuine friendships with other men. These men could be your eyes on the ground who have the potential to root out hidden sin in the ranks, who will disciple the young and immature into vibrant and influential disciples of Christ.

FOSTERING NATURAL FRIENDSHIPS FOR THE GLORY OF GOD

These sorts of friendships aren't built overnight. The men of your church won't meet someone today who can discern the motives of their heart tomorrow. But this is the goal we need to strive towards: to be brothers who know one another so well that we become men of understanding to each other.

We need to start small and work up. Experience shows that every friendship goes through different levels of communication.

It starts with cliché communication. “How are you?” “I’m fine.” “How’s the weather.”

It moves to fact communication. This is information about things going on in our lives or in the world. It’s more than cliché comments, but it also doesn’t involve deep thinking or feeling. “The stock market climbed this week.” “I heard Bob was sick.” “The game is this Saturday.” “I have a wife and two kids.”

Then it moves to belief communication. This is where you start talking about opinions. “I agree with you.” “I loved that movie.” “I think abortion is wrong.” These are your commentaries. This may be where friction is first experienced as differences of opinion arise.

Then it moves to feeling communication. This is where we start showing each other emotion. A belief statement might be: “I’m really struggling in this area.” But a feeling statement might be: “I’m really struggling and feel so depressed right now.” This is the stage where the walls come down.

Finally, there is transparency. This is when you’ve built up a habit of communication and you establish a routine of regularly sharing your dreams, confessing your sin, confronting one another, and encouraging one another at the heart level.

WHERE DO YOU START?

As you are challenging men to build these sorts of friendships, remember real friendship is born out of mutual interest. If you make friendship your focus, you’ll never find it. If you make accountability your focus—throwing a bunch of random men into a room to talk about their struggles—you’ll probably be disillusioned (and so will they). But if you encourage the men in your church to pursue a common goal, real friendships can be the result.

In his book, *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis said this is one of the differences between the love friends share and the love married couples share. Lovers are normally face to face, absorbed in each other. Friends are side by side, absorbed in a common interest. They share the same enthusiasm for something, a hobby, a topic, or a cause.

A PRACTICAL EXAMPLE

Here's an example of this from someone who uses our Accountability software:

The other day I received a Covenant Eyes report for one of my brothers and it looked as though he had visited a site, based on the name listed in the report, which was pornographic. He insisted he had not visited any porn sites that week, so I checked the site. In truth it was not pornographic; rather it was a site mainly targeted toward women which had articles about relationships.

I breathed a sigh of relief, but rather than simply move on, I asked him about the articles he had read. What resulted was a really good conversation about the loneliness in his heart, about wanting a quality relationship with a woman, and an admission that he sometimes struggles to “stay in the fight.” We were able to talk about feeling empty and being made complete in Christ. He was able to see that, while technically not lust, his reading of those articles was connected to his efforts to find acceptance, approval, significance and even completion in a woman.

Addressing those deeper longings got us to the root of what has fueled his porn indulgence over the years, as well as his general desire to have a woman in his life as a means of personal security.

It was all below the waterline just waiting to be discovered. That conversation was a moment of real significance, full of the potential for change. It happened because the best accountability is conversational.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if every man in your church had these sorts of friends?

YOUR SAILING COMPANIONS

We started with the story of Odysseus, but there's another famous story about the Sirens. This comes from the story of Jason and the Argonauts. The captain, Jason, was warned about the Sirens beforehand, so he prepared himself and his shipmates for the encounter. As they sailed along, a fresh breeze suddenly began to blow, and they saw the island. The Sirens spotted Jason's ship and began to sing with their seductive voices. The sailors were overcome with desire and were ready to cast their ropes from the boat to the shore.

But Jason had brought aboard his ship the legendary Orpheus. Orpheus was a man known throughout the world for his gift of music, his ability to play the stringed lyre. As the story goes, the men began to be overcome with the sound of the Siren's voice, but Orpheus pulled out his lyre and played a melody that filled the sailor's ears, "and the lyre overcame the maidens' voice." Orpheus' song overcame the spell, and disaster was averted.

Let's contrast these stories. How did Odysseus deal with temptation? He had friends around him who were willing to bind him with stronger ropes. To be sure, when we have these sorts of friends this is a great blessing. It's great to have those friends who can help us change our behavior, keep us clear of disaster.

But the Bible speaks of a sort of fellowship that is better. How did Jason deal with the temptation? How did he defeat the spell of the Sirens? He knew the only way to fight a spell is with a greater spell. He didn't look for stronger ropes. He brought along a more enchanting song.

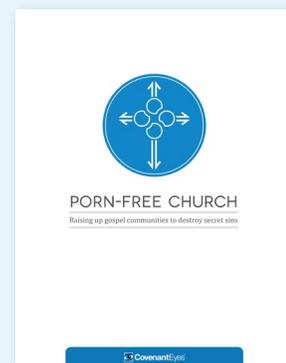
This is the sort of change the Bible promises us: not just changing our behavior, but actually changing our hearts. The gospel offers us better promises than the false promises of sin. Those better promises captivate our hearts and put us under a new spell. As C.S. Lewis said in a sermon delivered at Oxford, "Remember your fairy tales. Spells are used for breaking enchantments as well as for inducing them. And you and I have need of the strongest spell that can be found to wake us from the evil enchantment of worldliness." That stronger spell is the wonder and majesty of Christ.

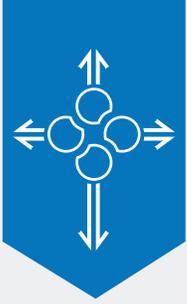
And when we have gospel-centered friends, they are able to not just get us to change our behavior, they are able to point us to the One who is more satisfying than sin.

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





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