
PORNOGRAPHY

Providing Accountability and Support

Rev. Dr. Peter Powell

But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet to warn the people and the sword comes and takes the life of one of them, that man will be taken away because of his sin, but I will hold the watchman accountable for his blood.

*Ezekiel 33:6
(New International Version)*

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ON THE OTHER SIDE OF PORNOGRAPHY

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'It was an accident really', James related, 'I was in my study thinking about the sermon I had written for tomorrow's worship, 'The power of evil vs the all encompassing love of Jesus Christ'. I started to think about evil. What did I personally know about it? I had grown up in a Christian home, married a Christian woman, filled my life with activity, studied for the ministry and given my life to serve the God that I loved. Addictions were something I had not considered. I never really understood the true meaning of being gripped by a force that was beyond my control. Just a quick look at the internet pornography, it's right here in the study, no one will ever know. That's how it started'.

Like many men who sit with me in my office, James was a family man who in 90% of his life presented a sound, Christian image of a minister leading his congregation from the word of God. In just a small area he had come to know, via the Internet, the power of evil. The Internet, which provides such inspiring, uplifting and life-changing words and images can also provide destructive, addictive images of pornography.

'At first I was just curious, James said, 'a quick scan and then logging out feeling rather ashamed. This progressed to thoughts of what I could do at night after all had gone to bed and the study was quiet. I could again view the images. I had even worked out how to download images so that I could have a very quick glance during the day. So here I was with pornographic images on my computer and who could I tell? I did not have the knowledge needed to permanently erase them and I knew that I could not ask for help. What would I say? 'Hello this is the pastor of a local church, how do I erase pornography from my computer?' By now I felt really terrible but I did not know how to fight this addiction. There were no bible studies I could find to help me; the leaders in my church would have been devastated to know that the man who preached the love on God on Sunday was feeding himself on images of pornography.'

It was not long before James began spending more time on the computer than he did with his family, particularly his wife. Slowly but surely their relationship was becoming more and more strained. It was easier to turn on the computer than to engage in intimate behaviour that required a commitment on his part. Excuses such as, 'just overtired from working too much' aroused suspicion. His wife thought he was having an affair and confronted him. Quite truthfully he answered that there was absolutely no 'other woman' in his life. He just forgot to mention his addiction to pornography.

James is not alone in his dilemma. Pornography is a pervasive, common issue amongst men, including Christian men. This is not to excuse it, but simply to remind ourselves that as long as humans have lived on the earth pornography and prostitution have been part of the male/female dynamic. There are more men in churches with sexual deviation than many would like to admit.

It takes courage to own up and face the issue and there are many men who have not yet come to that point. It was important for me to encourage James that he had begun, firstly by asking for help, to take a step forward on the journey towards recovery.

The worst thing a man can do is to dwell on the guilt and anxiety around the behavior. It is important to stop because it is unproductive and unhealthy, both spiritually and psychologically; however, if we

make stopping the behaviour the main focus of helping such men, we are likely to make the problem worse rather than better.

The way forward is to accept that it will take tough work to eliminate the behaviour. A clear sense of purpose, must be maintained as well as not creating panic about the issue. It is unlikely, except in a small number of cases, that men will experience an instant recovery. God is often gracious and empowering in this area and it is not unknown for people to instantly stop addictive behaviours, such as drinking or pornography. More commonly God requires time, discipline, mentoring, bible study and prayer to break down the addictive patterns.

When Jesus is in the garden of Getheseme praying he asks the disciples to pray with him. It is a tough request. They have to work right through the night at a very stressful time. They fall asleep. In a similar way Jesus challenges the woman at the well to go and get her husband. That is extremely confronting for her. She has the opportunity to avoid the questions or she can face the tough issue and receive healing from Jesus. God's love for us at times is a very tough love, so the goal of change is quite realistic as long as the pornography addict is prepared to work with the Holy Spirit towards that goal.

Like many others, James asked why is this so? How can a man be so addicted to this behaviour. There are many answers to this complex question. One critical issue constantly emerging in treatment is that men who behave this way are often experiencing deep grief over the losses in their lives. This could be the loss of parents through divorce, abandonment or illness, the loss of purpose in their life, a mid-life crisis of loss of direction, the realisation that their partner is not going to meet every need they have, or other issues of unresolved grief. They often feel unloved and unlovable. They are usually unaware of these issues.

One way some men cope with their losses and abandonment is to try and attach in dependent ways, much as they did when they were children. That is, snuggle up to the breast and try and suckle goodness back in. Pornography is one symbolic way of trying to get nurtured. A critical strategy is talking about feelings of grief and loss that have been experienced so that men have an opportunity to work on the grieving process, rather than acting out their grief in inappropriate ways.

There is sometimes a deep emptiness in men that they need to fill. Pornography and other sexual deviations become a way of numbing the pain and filling themselves up with something that will make them 'feel better'. Like alcohol and other drugs, pornography can develop into an addiction that is just as difficult to treat. Despite the amount of support they get, many of the men I work with still feel loneliness and emptiness. Sometimes despite all the good things that have been given, there is a sense of ungratefulness because these things are not enough. Often the man's partner will report, 'It doesn't matter how much I give, he always wants more.'

Finding a mentor is a critical issue for men caught up in pornography. A person who will be available to talk and pray with the man and be there to help break the addiction. When the man feels the need for help, a mentor is someone who is available to take a telephone call and offer support. It is someone who will ring at any unexpected hour to check on the man's progress; someone who can be a physical presence showing the love of God, but also encourages accountability.

The feelings of loneliness and grief often come and go; consequently, there is a need to keep reassuring the man and encouraging the movement into positive activity. For the man this will sometimes mean being in a crowd or with the family and still feeling that isolating sense of aloneness, but learning to say, 'I know what this feeling is and I can take care of my isolation'. The key strategy is

for the adult mature part of the man to feel in control and able to nurture himself. Once the man falls into the trap of feeling sorry for himself, it is easy to crawl away into a quiet hidden space where he can indulge the more childlike side of his personality.

Another key issue can be the absence of a strong and caring male figure in a man's life. In order to develop a strong gender identity it is helpful to have a strong bonding relationship with the same gender parent. When that is absent there is a risk of men developing anxiety about their identity. This gender immaturity puts such men at risk for engaging in a variety of sexually deviant behaviours, including pornography. Being prepared to put in hard work on the missing father image can assist men develop stronger identities. Just as the 'Father' image of God can be a difficulty for women who have been abused by men, so a positive 'father' God who is present rather than absent can be a healing image for men. The hardest conversation that James undertook was to tell his wife the truth, to say he was asking help then and ask for her support. Thankfully in this case she gave it, but the issue is often much more destructive for the marriage.

James is still travelling on his journey. He has a mentor, a wife who is supportive – even though she cannot understand why some men behave this way - and an active prayer life. We still spend time together discussing his journey towards recovery, always knowing that it will be easy for him to return to pornography should he not be vigilant in his Christian life.

James is not alone. There are many men who find this addiction so easy, so relaxing, an escape from the need to be intimate. It feeds their childlike obsession that someone or something else will always be there to provide nurture. While it is a difficult issue to treat, it is possible. What is needed in the church is less denial and avoidance of such issues. When men realise that there is possible treatment and that they will not be vilified if they come forward, they are more likely to seek such help.

The Pastoral Counseling Institute can provide information and treatment relating to pornography, sexual affairs, child abuse (victims and perpetrators) and a range of other concerns about sexual behaviour.

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