

The first time I saw pornography was in ninth grade, and it wasn't even my fault. I didn't go looking for it. I wasn't trying to be secretive. I wasn't seeking it out. It found me.

Our high school had started taking us to a local bowling alley for gym class. As we were bowling, I was talking with my friends when another classmate walked over to me and said, "Hey you wanna see something cool?" And of course, I'm like, "Yeah!"

He opened up his phone. On the phone was a naked woman. I felt tears well up within me. My heart began pounding in my chest and my stomach turned. In that moment, it felt like something broke inside of me.

The next time I remember seeing pornography was shortly after that experience and it wasn't my fault. I didn't go looking for it. I wasn't trying to be secretive. I wasn't seeking it out. It found me.

I was staying at my grandparents' place for a few days over the summer in southwestern Pennsylvania. That was always fun because we'd ride four-wheelers, shoot guns, watch all their cable TV, and so on.

One evening, late at night, I was out in the living room watching TV with my grandfather and he put on something from HBO. In the movie, two people were having sex. He just left it there and *watched*. And so did I.

This time, I didn't feel much of anything.

The next time I remember seeing pornography *was* my fault. I did go looking for it. I tried to be secretive. I sought it out. And I found *it*.

I was at home, in my room. I was flipping through the TV channels and came across something with almost-pornographic content on display. That moment started an addiction that lasted into college.

I can tell you now that I have been freed from that addiction and that I am not looking at porn, but if I'm being completely honest, I still feel dirty, ashamed, broken, derelict, like a shadow of the man I could have been because of the things I allowed to enter my mind.

The sad reality is that my story probably isn't too far off from many of you in here.

Here's what I know:

- In America, about 57% of people have watched porn in the last month.
- 64% of Christian men and 15% of Christian women say they watch porn at least once a month.
- 1 in 5 youth pastors and 1 in 7 senior pastors use porn on a regular basis and are currently struggling. That's more than 50,000 U.S. church leaders.
- 69% of pastors say porn has adversely impacted the church.
- For *our church*, porn use is one of those ever-present but not openly talked about things many of us struggle with.

We're in a sub-series on 1 Corinthians talking about biblical sexuality. We've already had several hard conversations. Today's topic is no different. Porn consumption is the silent spiritual pandemic. That's why we're talking about it today. So, if you're new here, *welcome*. If you're old here, buckle up.

I don't want to approach this conversation in a finger-pointing, how-could-you kind of way to people who are struggling. I want to cast a vision, not only for the person struggling with porn, but for all of us. Here's the vision: what would it look like for us to become a porn-free community?

To become a porn-free community it's going to take all of us. It's going to take us as individuals to do the hard work, but it's going to take this community to help bear the burden. I have three sub-questions to help us answer the main one:

- (1) What would we need to know?
- (2) What would we need to feel?
- (3) What would we need to do?

WHAT WOULD WE NEED TO KNOW?

1. The first thing we'd need to know is that "not everything is beneficial."

Quoting the Corinthians, in 1 Corinthians 6:12, Paul said, "I have the right to do anything,' you say—but not everything is beneficial." The Corinthians thought that because they had the right to do anything, then they could do whatever they wanted, which was leading them into all kinds of sin. But Paul urged them not to think of what they could do, but to think about what was spiritually profitable for their hearts, minds, bodies, and souls. He asked, "Is what you're doing beneficial?"

Which makes *me* ask: "Is porn beneficial?" Now, you may scoff at even asking *that* question, but some people think it's no big deal, that it's actually a positive thing, that because it relieves stress it's all good, that it's a private thing so no reason to get up in arms about it, that it *feels* good so why prohibit it, that it doesn't harm anyone so why make a fuss about it?

Think with me:

- Is porn consumption truly **beneficial** if 88% of porn films include *physical* aggression and 55% of porn films include *verbal* aggression?
- Is porn consumption truly **beneficial** if it leads to feelings of loneliness, social embarrassment, insecurity, self-disgust, impairment of sexual arousal, diminished trust, unrealistic expectations for relationships, and body image issues?
- Is porn consumption truly **beneficial** if your consumption of it propagates a \$3.3 BILLION porn industry with 28,258 viewers every second who are being trained to view other people—friends, coworkers, and maybe even children—as sexual commodities?
- Is porn consumption truly **beneficial** if women in porn films are continually (pardon the graphic nature of this) spit on, beaten, slapped, choked, and more for the sexual gratification of others?

Respectfully, I'll answer for you: "No." The answer is, "No." Porn is NOT beneficial.

2. You need to know not only that porn isn't beneficial, but also that you're not to be mastered by anything.

This is where the second part of verse 12 comes in. Again quoting the Corinthians, Paul wrote, "I have the right to do anything—but I will not be mastered by anything."

Paul's concern for the Corinthians was that they would be *mastered* by their sexual desires. That word "mastered" literally references authority figures, people in high positions who have power and use their

power to make their subjects do as they please. That's exactly what a porn addiction can be like for people.

Neurologically, porn floods the brain with dopamine; that rush of chemicals rewires your brain altogether when it happens over and over again. This is called neuroplasticity: neurons that fire together, wire together. Eventually, as you're watching porn, your brain is so overloaded by the dopamine that it shuts down some of its dopamine receptors—which means that you don't get the same high as before, which leads to the need for more and more extreme forms of porn or sexual stimulation to get the same feeling. That's why this is so addictive.

Last year, the New York Times ran an article called “Jobless, Selling Nudes Online and Still Struggling.” The article details the economic impact of the pandemic on women in our country and tells how a surprising number of women/single moms believe their only option to make ends meet is to join OnlyFans (a social media platform where users sell original content to monthly subscribers) and try to make money by posting pictures or videos of themselves nude or in lingerie.

The article describes one woman, Elle Morocco, who was laid off from her job and found that she couldn't pay her bills (rent, utilities, food costs, etc.) with her monthly unemployment check. So what did she do? She created an OnlyFans account.

She thought it would be a way to make extra money, but it ended up being more than she bargained for. “It's a full-time job on top of your full-time job looking for work,” she said. “Fans want to see you posting daily. You're always churning; You're always taking pictures to post.”

When I read that story, it broke my heart knowing that *that's* what she believes she has to do to make ends meet. But I also felt bad for her “fans,” because not only were they treating her like you would a McDonald's burger, simply a way to satiate their hunger, but they were also turning themselves into animals, unable to control their desires. Why does she have to post *daily*? To always have to churn out content? To always have to be taking pictures? It's because her “fans” are pawns to their own appetites. They're enslaved. They're not sober-minded; rather they're frantic and compulsive.

This is where Paul comes in. Paul's telling us, “Man, God has a much grander vision for your sexual flourishing than to be enslaved to a porn addiction. You were made for sexual freedom not sexual bondage.”

3. You need to know that Christ's body is not meant to be profaned.

You might be thinking, “Woah, woah...hang on. I thought we were talking about *my* body?” We are, sort of. Look at verse 15: “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself?” What a radical statement. You and I, if we're followers of Jesus, are Christ's *body*. Paul is saying, “Seriously. If you're *in* Christ, you become a member, a sort of body part of Christ. You're the tangible representation of Christ on earth because the Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, lives in YOU.” Which makes Paul's next statement astounding.

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, “The two will become one flesh.” But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit. (1 Corinthians 6:15-17)

I want us to home in on that second line. What's his point? He's saying, “Church, listen—your body is not your own. It belongs to Christ. And just as when you get married and you become ‘one flesh’ with

another person, anytime you engage in sexual activity outside of the covenant of marriage you are implicitly uniting *Christ* to that person on the other side of the screen.”

Paul is saying, “Don’t join Christ to something unholy. Don’t mix Jesus up with anything immoral. Don’t meld the Son of God to the profane.”

So, if we want to become a porn free community we need to know (1) not everything is beneficial, (2) we’re not to be mastered by anything, and (3) Christ’s body is not to be profaned.

So, what do we do? This is all good to know, but you can’t *think* yourself out of addiction. So, what next?

WHAT WOULD WE NEED TO FEEL?

I wanted to ask this question because so often in a sermon like this, on a topic like this, we have the tendency to lull to sleep on it. It’s easy to want to check out. It’s hard to overcome that desire in us to satisfy that sexual urge. It’s easier to distract ourselves from the hard work ahead. Or it’s easy to feel defeated, like we’ll never be able to overcome, because we’ve tried so many times before, so why even try? But listen to Paul’s language in verse 18: “*Flee* sexual immorality.” Then in verse 20 he says “*Honor* God with your bodies.”

FLEE + HONOR. FLEE + HONOR. FLEE + HONOR. Strong language. *Emotive* language. Language that shakes you. Language that moves you. Like a spiritual brake check.

Feel this with me. The word “flee” evokes what sort of image or disposition in your mind? To me, it’s wording that’s saying, “Get the heck out! Get out of dodge! Run! ESCAPE!” Like Paul *isn’t* playing games here. He’s not like Christian accountability groups today in which someone messes up and we reply, “Aw, mate. It’s all good. There, there. It’s okay. You’ll get ‘em next time. Chin up. There’s always next time.” No—Paul’s saying “Run, my man. RUN!”

But he also says to “honor” your bodies. This is also language evoking profound emotions. But instead of carrying connotations of adrenaline spikes and sweat and my life is on the line, the word “honor” carries connotations of dignity, royalty, kingliness, queenliness.

The queen of England’s funeral service was held last week. You know how her body was treated? With total and complete respect. People lined up to pay their respects, her body was clothed in the best of the best and adorned with expensive jewels, and she was soberly eulogized.

Why? Because her body *meant* something. Because her body was where her spirit was on display. Because she was royalty. Because she was a queen.

Your body deserves the same. YOU do not deserve the desecration of a 1:00 am porn binge. If you’re in Christ, the Bible says you’re a “saint” (1 Corinthians 1:2), that you’re a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17), that you are Christ’s “workmanship” (Ephesians 2:10), that you are a “child of God” (John 1:12), that you are Jesus’ “friend” (John 15:15), that you are a “co-heir with Christ” (Romans 8:17), and that you are *imago Dei*, made in the “image of God” (Gen. 1:27).

So, we talked about what would we need to know, what would we need to feel, but how *do* we flee? How *do* we honor our bodies? This leads us to question #3.

WHAT WOULD WE NEED TO DO?

1. Bring it into the light.

Don't hide it in the dark. Bring it out. Find a faithful brother or sister of the same gender to share your struggle with.

Part of the reason we run to porn is because we feel broken inside, or lonely, or insecure, or unlovable, or unwanted, or overburdened by the stress of life, or weighed down by negative emotions, or inadequate. Part of the path of healing comes through restorative relationships. Who can you be fully known by? Who will love you despite knowing everything about you?

For those who don't struggle with porn, here's my encouragement to you when you're relating to life group members, friends, or parents: *be* the kind of person who will bear burdens, be a *safe* person, be the kind of person who asks your kids and friends how they're doing in these areas (if you have the relational equity built up—don't be weird), go with these folks if necessary to counseling appointments, to classes to help the addiction, etc.

2. Get accountable.

Opt for both pre- and post-accountability. Often when we enter into "accountability," it's "post-accountability," which is the Christian way of saying, "I go to someone *post* when I mess up." This is good because it brings things into the light. You can receive, tangibly, the mercy and love and grace of God through another brother or sister in Christ.

But let's also vie for pre-accountability, where a couple things happen:

- VISION—You determine what kind of person you want to become in life (Christ-like)
- INTENTION—You commit to achieving that vision
- MEANS—You determine the practices/disciplines you'll utilize to help you get there with the Holy Spirit's help (Scripture, prayer, life group, generosity, etc.)
- COMMUNITY—You enlist others to hold you accountable to that plan

It's like a football team with the vision to win the Superbowl. Everyone on the team is committed to that goal. They have the intent to achieve it. The means? Workouts, practices, film study, camaraderie, eating right, and so on. Everyone holds each other accountable not only after someone messes up in the game, but also all along the way—Hey man, you eating right? Hey bro, you get your film study done?—You get the idea.

God has a vision for your life. God wants to form you into someone who has the heart and character of Jesus. God wants to craft you into someone who loves without condition, someone not in bondage to evil desires, someone who doesn't commodify other people, but serves them.

God has given you the Church as the people *willing* to help you on that journey. And we will be that church. Hold those you love in your life accountable. Don't let them go it alone. Bear the yoke with them.

3. Design your environment.

Many times, we don't do ourselves any favors when wrestling with any addiction, let alone a porn addiction. We put our phones next to our beds without any accountability software, or we have our

computers hidden away from public places, so that when we feel tempted to look at things we shouldn't it's that much easier to give in. *Why do we do that to ourselves?*

I had a friend once who literally bought an old-time analog clock instead of using his iPhone as his alarm in the morning because he knew that if his hand went to his phone first thing in the morning, he'd be tempted to go to social media, he'd start seeing images on social media, which would then prompt his brain to search out more and more pornographic material. Now, with the phone out in the kitchen where it's a hassle to go get in the morning, his attempt to be porn-free has been infinitely more successful.

So, do what you need to do to set up an environment that will help you flourish. Don't put yourself in one designed to make you fail.

That's three tips, but really, at least for my own life, the thing that has brought the most healing into my heart on this front has been introductions of love.

Behind a lot of porn use is what I've already mentioned. It isn't just that we're sexually cooped up and need a release. At the core of our hearts, we long to love and be loved. We long for connection, to feel close to others, to feel safe, to feel wanted, to feel desired. I know that in my heart of hearts, that's what I long for. And I know for all of us, it's the same.

What I know has always been healing for me in life has been whenever I've been introduced to Love, like when I first confessed to my dad during high school that I was struggling with a porn addiction. I was so scared. So afraid. Would he be mad? Would he be disappointed? Would he think of me as dirty and gross? When I finally mustered up the courage to share, he looked at me in the eyes and said, "Son, thank you for sharing this with me. I love you so much. We'll get through this together." It was *an introduction of love*.

When I was in college, early on I fell into the habit again and finally summoned up the courage to share with a friend. I was so afraid that I'd be the only one, so scared of making things weird, but when I shared, he looked at me, not shying away, and said, "Emerson, I love you more now than before." It was *an introduction of love*.

Once when I was at a retreat center, with lots of silence and solitude, I sat looking at an image of Jesus on the cross with Psalm 139 resounding in my being. I was confronted by the overwhelming love of the Father for me *despite* all my sin and all my shame. I heard God whisper, "You are my Beloved. I know about it all. I love you so much." It was *an introduction of love*.

This past week, I was traveling and read a book about this painting that I introduced last week (view the online sermon to see the painting). The painting is of the prodigal son, a story that Jesus tells in the Scriptures. The book detailed Rembrandt's vision for the painting, how he painted it, what the painting meant, how it related to this biblical story, and what it shows us about the Father's heart towards you and me. I cried, because again it was another *introduction of love*.

For the rest of our time, I want to give us a moment to sit with this painting, a moment to throw everything we struggle with aside to be with the Father.