

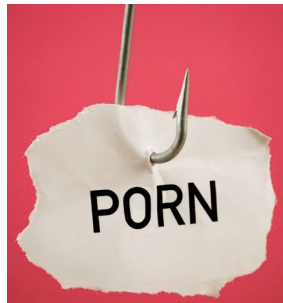
## Seeking Sexual Integrity: Stories of Men and Pornography

God desires that we enjoy the divine gift of loving, sexual intimacy, as illustrated in the erotic love poems of The Song of Solomon in the Old Testament.

But pornography degrades sexuality, violates our integrity, and harms women, children and men. As destructive as it is, pornography is widely used and has a powerful hold on most men and a growing number of women. Consider the following statistics.

### How common is porn?

- “Sex” is the most popular Internet search term.
- 1 in 5 mobile searches are for pornography.
- 1 in 4 smartphone owners have pornographic material on their device.



### Who uses porn?

- Men who say they view pornography at least once a month: 18- to 30-year-olds, 79%; 31- to 49-year-olds, 67%; 50- to 68-year-olds, 49%.
- Women who say they view pornography at least once a month: 18- to 30-year-olds, 76%; 31- to 49-year-olds, 16%; 50- to 68-year-olds, 4%.
- 64% of Christian men and 15% of Christian women say they view pornography at least once a month.<sup>1</sup>

### Men recovering from porn

We are Christian men who have used pornography and are committed to a process of recovery. As a group of Mennonite men, including several pastors, we meet regularly for mutual support and accountability. We acknowledge that our stories are written from our experience as heterosexual males and recognize that sexual orientation varies among men.

In this series, we share our stories of seeking sexual integrity. From our experience, we know the captivating and destructive power of pornography. We also know the transforming power of God’s grace embodied in our men’s group as a community of healing and hope. As we share our stories, we trust that other men will find healing and hope as they face pornography in their lives. The stories are limited to two pages so they can be printed on one page front and back for group discussion.

We invite readers to use our anonymous personal stories and discussion questions to engage other men in conversation and join—or form—recovery groups for those seeking sexual integrity. We believe that resisting porn and recovering from its harm requires men to work at this together, because going it alone usually fails.

### Discussion sheets in this packet include:

1. The Joy of Recovery
2. Eros as a Gift from God
3. Biblical Reflections on Lust
4. From *Playboy* to Healthy Sexuality
5. Diminishing Returns
6. Correcting Our Vision
7. How Living into Our Calling Can Make a Difference

Given the focus of these testimonies, this series does not address issues of patriarchy, power imbalances and sexism involved in pornography. More than an individual, spiritual struggle, pornography also needs to be confronted as part of a destructive social system.

### Other helpful resources:

The preceding series can be used in tandem with *Pornography: Lies, Truth and Hope* (2013) by Mennonite Central Committee. This booklet discusses God’s gift of sexuality, defines pornography, describes harm it causes, outlines lies and truths about pornography, provides practical action plans, and lists excellent resources for further help. Download this booklet from our Mennonite Men JoinMen resources or click [here](#).

### Books our men’s group has found helpful:

- Anonymous authors, *Hope and Recovery: A Twelve Step Guide for Healing from Compulsive Sexual Behavior* (1994)
- Mark Laaser, *Faithful and True: Sexual Integrity in a Fallen World or Healing the Wounds of Sexual Addiction* (1996)
- Gerald May, *Addiction and Grace: Love and Spirituality in the Healing of Addictions* (2007)
- Pamela Paul, *Pornified: How Pornography Is Damaging Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families* (2006)
- Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps* (2011)

We encourage readers to freely distribute this packet to groups or individuals who might find this useful. For more resources, visit [MennoniteMen.org](http://MennoniteMen.org).

<sup>1</sup> According to a 2014 survey conducted by the Barna Group in the U.S.

## 1. The Joy of Recovery

Boys will be boys, I thought. Along with most teenage guys, I figured I had a harmless habit of looking at pornography. I thought when I matured as a man I'd stop. In his chapter on true love, Paul writes, "When I was a child ... I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways" (1 Corinthians 13:11). But I didn't stop. And ever since, I've wrestled with the power of pornography, struggling to be a man of integrity.

A favorite book growing up was *The Joy of Sex*. It was more accessible than pornography. I could easily see it at most bookstores and didn't fear getting caught with it as I would standing with a pornographic magazine. Still, I looked for any chance to view porn. I longed for the joy of sex. Tantalizing images teased my passionate desires for sexual pleasure.

In time, images weren't enough. I needed more to be satisfied. So I acted out with willing partners also looking for love in the wrong way, fooling ourselves that we were finding real "joy." Instead I found pain, shame and bondage. I suffered from a case of disordered love, more commonly known as lust. A false "joy" of gratifying sexual desires of my flesh took me captive. What I took, took me. My compulsion became an addiction. Thinking I was free to do as I pleased, I became enslaved.

After graduating from a Christian college and getting married, I assumed my habit would be replaced by the sexual intimacy I enjoyed with my wife. And certainly as a pastor I never imagined my problem would persist. To my dismay, when I ventured too close to a magazine stand with *Playboy* or *Penthouse*, porn's powerful tractor beam pulled me to the rack. This didn't happen often, I never purchased pornography, and I would go long periods of time without browsing; but a strong desire for it was always within me, if only dormant.

One evening in the mid-1990s when I did an innocent search on the Internet, a pornographic image appeared on my screen. I was shocked, for I didn't know that it was there. My dormant desire had been awakened. The ease of private access on my computer provided something I had never imagined. Some say that Internet porn is the crack cocaine of pornography. I was hooked: lust at first sight.

Like most men, I found that refraining from pornography is a struggle. We live in a highly sexualized culture with visual images that arouse our God-given desires and whip



them into passionate lust. Inner passions and outer opportunity easily create a craving for porn. With Internet porn just a click away in privacy, it's simply too easy to enter the sites. It's like being an alcoholic with a refrigerator next to his desk stocked with cold beer.

What drives me to do what I really don't want to do?

- When I'm stressed, porn provides temporary relief.
- When I'm exhausted, it gives me a rush.
- When I've achieved something, it's a perk.
- When I'm lonely, it offers a woman who wants me.
- When I'm in pain, porn is a way of not feeling.

When I use porn, I'm not thinking about its fleeting satisfaction, my pain or the serious risks—like divorce or being fired. I'm out of my right mind and in my addict's mind, which can justify anything. When the autopilot of lust is switched on, and I click "Yes," I lose command of myself, and I'm taken to the cyber pit—the dark destination where God's gift of sexuality is defiled, women are degraded, men are disgraced, and relationships are dishonored.

I know all too well the powerlessness over involuntary desires of craving, unwanted thoughts of obsession and conflicted actions of compulsion. I want something bad badly, so badly that I let it overwhelm what I truly want.

For God's sake, I'm a *pastor*! And pornography violates what I believe and value, namely that:

- Women are *not* objects of desire; women are beloved daughters of God
- I am to look upon and relate to women as sisters
- I am to maintain not just physical but mental fidelity in marriage
- I am to live with freedom, love and integrity.

I identify with what Paul writes in Romans 7:15–19. He puts it boldly: “I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate ... I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do ... Wretched man that I am!”

I’m not alone. Not only do most men struggle with pornography, 51% of pastors say cyber-porn is a temptation, and 37% state it is a current struggle.<sup>2</sup> Another survey reports 64% of church leaders admit to having a problem with some sexual compulsion or addiction.<sup>3</sup> So I’m one of many men caught between sexual compulsion and spiritual integrity.

My painful, sometimes humiliating struggle has led me to the path of recovery. The first step for me was admitting my problem and that it impacts women, my spouse and myself. Knowing my problem, a trusted female pastor friend helped me when she said, “When you look at pornography, it hurts me.” I got, and felt, her point. It also made me wonder, *How would I feel if someone looked at my sister or daughter the way I look at females in pornography?* After all, the woman in the image is someone’s daughter or sister.

Then it was a matter of becoming self-aware and noticing my needs. My problem, pain and powerlessness became an occasion for God’s grace. I found what Paul found: God’s compassionate love, which moved me from feeling like a “wretched man” to being freed from lust by Christ’s love. I realized God’s desire to free me from my habit, renew my mind and restore my sight so increasingly I could see women as beloved daughters of God.

Knowing that we can be as sick as our secrets, I have shared my struggle with my spouse. She has been understanding, compassionate and supportive. To honor our relationship, I am open and honest with her, yet I own my problem—that is, I take responsibility for it—so she doesn’t have to tend it. I have others for this.

I need others to join me on the path of recovery. My spiritual director has been a gracious confessor with whom I can admit my struggles. He is an understanding guide to show me the way forward with spiritual practices.

Having a spiritual friend for many years has been helpful. We are companions on the same path. We discuss our temptations and occasional failures. We can call each other at any time, and we hold each other accountable.

I also meet with a men’s group that focuses on sexual integrity. We check in with each for support and accountability. We read materials on sexuality. We share practices for recovery, such as setting up Internet filters to block tempting sites. And we pray. These practices empower us to live with greater sexual integrity than if we tried to go it alone.

Further, I am fortunate to be part of a small group in our church with whom I can share my struggle. I understand, however, when others pull back into a lonely secrecy, feeling ashamed or unsafe—because church people sometimes react more with judgment than understanding.

By cooperating with God and with the support of friends, the downward spiral of compulsion is being reversed. While I still struggle with porn from time to time, I’m experiencing the upward path of freedom, respect and love, which lead to spiritual integrity and true sexual intimacy. I call this *the joy of recovery*.

### Discussion questions

1. When did you realize that you had a problem with pornography?
2. How has porn impacted you and others?
3. Where have you found help in recovering from porn?
4. What practices do you need to enjoy sexual intimacy and integrity?

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<sup>2</sup> “The Leadership Survey on Pastors and Internet Pornography: How widespread is it?” *Leadership Journal* (January 1, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Means, *Men’s Secret Wars* (2006).

## 2. Eros as a Gift from God

Early on (say, in high school) the word “erotic” had a distinctive nuance for me: secretive, risqué, sensual. It certainly meant sexual, and it fed my craving for glimpses of female nudity and genital sexual reference, either visual or literary. In junior high and high school, the closest I could get to erotic images were women’s lingerie and swimsuits in advertisements and catalogs. In college, I “advanced” to *Playboy* and Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer*. Masturbating to such images and descriptions became a regular habit of my life.

Very confusing to me, already at 12 or 13 years of age, was having these obsessive sexual inclinations at the same time that I felt certain spiritual promptings. Somehow I just knew these simultaneous attractions were incompatible, that one of these was “good” and one was “bad.” How I knew this is hard to say, since I recall no explicit condemnation of sexual impulses. But, of course, in my small Mennonite community and my very proper family, I received no affirmative endorsement of sexuality either, apart from being able to watch the fascinating, if matter-of-fact, artificial insemination of our cows.

My parents were quite undemonstrative in their physical interactions with each other and with their children—and tight-lipped about sex. Yes, I learned the reproductive processes of cows, but I was never enlightened about similarities (and differences) in humans. So I conclude, now, that I somehow breathed in from my environment—Sunday school, ministers, teachers, parents and peers—a decidedly negative slant on all things sexual, including those ornery, even “sinful,” erections that I began to experience in puberty. Of course, ornery or not, there was an energy there that needed attention, both to somehow express but, above all, to hide from others.

The upshot of all this is that I became publicly quite pious but privately very conflicted. My piety, I need to say, wasn’t just superficial; from my churchy surroundings I also breathed in a Spirit that called forth a deep longing for God. Certain adults I knew and others I read about evoked a buried “me” that wanted desperately to be a saint. I had these inner arguments about which me was “real,” which was the deepest me—the sexually craved self or the longing monk. While God seemed indifferent to my pleas to make me sexually pure, I never quite gave up on God to ultimately “have” me.



I suppose I’ve engaged in some form of that internal argument for the majority of my 70-plus years. By God’s mercy, in recent years this interminable conversation has begun to subside, and that’s partly due to a deeper understanding of *eros*. And much of that understanding comes from Ronald Rolheiser, a Catholic writer, especially in his book, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality*.<sup>4</sup>

**What is eros?** Eros is the ultimate life force, says Rolheiser, noting that it “lies at the center of human experience and in the deep recesses of the soul.” At once a gift from God *and* an imperialistic energy, the effects of eros can seem contradictory. On the one hand, St. John of the Cross could write: “One dark night, fired by love’s urgent longings, Ah, the sheer grace ...” On the other hand, Plato exclaims, “We are fired into life with a madness that comes from the gods ...”

An incurable desire, an unquenchable fire, an all-embracing ache, eros was treated with holy reverence in premodern human communities. These folk saw it as an energy that comes from God and leads back to God. It is what impels us, inexorably, to yearn for something, for somebody, beyond ourselves, to long to create and to procreate. Eros is energy for love, sex, all creative endeavors, wild adventure—and also for prayer, worship and even chastity!

What we do with eros, that fire, those longings, that energy, is our spirituality. Spirituality in this sense is not necessarily religious, though it *is* the work of the soul in both accessing and channeling the fundamental life energy within us. Thus our spirituality can steer us into depression and compulsive indulgence—or into quiet intimacy and exhilarating creativity.

<sup>4</sup> *The Holy Longing*, pp. 3–5, 7, 18, 22–27, 34, 196–198.

For me, this perspective on eros has been helpful in three ways.

First, it de-moralizes sex. Sex, my preoccupation with sex and even raw genitality are not first of all bad or sinful. Rather they are expressions of God-given energy that impels me to relate, to reach out, to touch, even to become erect. It makes me human—like Jesus! So my first response to sexual stimulation doesn't have to be "Bad dog! Down!" I can acknowledge my innate response with calm, even delight.

Second, this view of eros has helped me realize that when I encounter some sexual reality *without reverence*, I'm playing with fire. Almost by definition, I think, pornography can hardly be approached with reverence; so when I access it, I'm willingly surrendering to its compulsive power, which is substantial. Much more subtle are relationships (for me, with "attractive" young women) and the temptation to mind-enclosed fantasy. I clearly have a choice to invoke, or not, an attitude of "holy regard" for the other and for the dynamic of sexual attraction. This applies of course not just to face-to-face relationships but also to mere visual (or imaginative) encounters. Though it's God-given, activated erotic energy can become tyrannous if left unchecked.

Third, for me the gift of eros lies largely in its breadth of expression. Eros is at work (or play) when I kiss my wife, but also when I pass communion bread to another (or receive it), when my grandchild gives me a hug, when I join in prayer for a sick or grieving brother or sister. All of these are expressions of eros, the overcoming of separateness in the giving and receiving of life and blessing it.

I am learning that I don't have to argue with myself about the deepest "me." It may have paradoxical expressions, but eros is essentially an integrative dynamic in my life, one that God freely offers to help make me whole.

### Discussion questions

1. To what extent do you relate the words "eros" or "erotic" to your sexual yearnings? Do they evoke ambivalence, e.g., are they primarily "good" or "bad"? How are you attempting to resolve the mixed messages and feelings?
2. Can *eros* and *yearning for God* be compatible—or even the same thing? How does your religious background, or current spirituality, connect the two?

3. What is your experience of taking on an attitude of "holy regard" for another person, especially when you notice sexual attraction, in real-life situations? How are you growing in your ability to see everyone, including yourself, as beloved children of the Creator?



### 3. Biblical Reflections on Lust

I believe God created sexual passion for loving intimacy. The Song of Solomon unveils this sexual passion as a burning, erotic desire between a bride and groom to enjoy each other's body. This passion is so powerful in the poem the repeated refrain exclaims, *"Do not arouse or awaken love until it is ready!"*

There's nothing wrong with this erotic love, unless it turns to lust, one of the seven "deadly sins." And what is lust? A disorder of sexual desire. It's not simply noticing an attractive person or the natural arousal I feel. Rather, lust is the carnal craving to gratify my flesh with that of another. It looks upon a person as a sexual object to use to satisfy my selfish desires.

As such, lust is a sin that dishonors women and disgraces men. It's a sin that defiles minds and destroys marriages. And lust is a sin that degrades God's gift of sex.

I would do well to heed the warning of Proverbs 5. Those who are lured by lust will be ensnared, captured and destroyed. Sound exaggerated? Consider its outcomes: dishonor, financial waste and ruined reputation, to say nothing of degraded women, broken marriages and a spouse's wrath.

The Bible is open about sexual passion and honest about sexual failure. Consider David, often seen as Israel's greatest king, a man after God's own heart and composer of inspiring psalms. Overtaken by his lust for Bathsheba and abusing his power, David sexually assaulted her, resulting in her pregnancy and his violent cover-up.

Like his father, Solomon came to ruin by lust. God's wisest king and author of countless proverbs knew better, but he didn't do better. Overcome by his lust, his heart turned from God and this famously wise man fell into ruin, revealing the power of lust.

Paul understood the tormenting battle between flesh and spirit. Realizing the captivating power of sin, he confessed: *"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate ... I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"* (Romans 7:15, 23–24).



With these biblical figures I, know the overpowering compulsion of lust, especially when it comes to pornography. Too many times I've experienced how a thought or an image thickens into desire, then desire into raging lust that's hard to resist. Countless times I've yielded to lust and lost the battle. As Thomas à Kempis notes in *The Imitation of Christ*, the best time to stop temptation is at first recognition of the thought. After that, if one engages with lust, temptation usually wins.

Pornographic browsing offers fleeting satisfaction and leaves me in an emotional swamp. I am guilty of spiritual infidelity by looking with lust upon degrading images of women. I have self-contempt for committing adultery in my heart. I feel ashamed for breaking my vow of chastity and betraying my commitment to honor women as beloved daughters of God. So with Paul I cry out, "Wretched man that I am!"

It's absurd what I trade for sexual craving. Remember how in his hunger Esau bartered away his inheritance for Jacob's bowl of stew? Noting the power of lust to dominate our will, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said lust "brings the whole body into hell, making us sell our heavenly birthright for a mess of pottage ... The gains of lust are trivial compared to the loss it brings—you forfeit your body eternally for the momentary pleasure of eye or hand" (*The Cost of Discipleship*, pp. 147–148).

Consider the trade I make to satisfy the craving of lust with momentary pleasure. Like Esau trading his birthright for a bowl of stew, I exchange ...

- Honor for violation
- Freedom for bondage
- Esteem for shame
- Sexual intimacy for tainted sex
- Reputation for disrepute

That's the morally bankrupt bargain of lust. No one in his right mind would make such a trade. But when I'm in the clutches of lust, I'm not in my right mind. I'm set not on the Spirit but on the flesh in a world saying, "Gratify your desires!" So I can be seduced by the lord of flesh and taken captive to the cyber pit.

How can I overcome this deadly sin and captivating vice? Certainly not by trying to overpower it alone. By myself, I am powerless against lust. If it can bring down a mighty warrior like David and a wise king like Solomon, it can easily conquer me. I need help.

Here's good news! God delivers me from sin and shame. Jesus, who prevailed against temptation, frees me from the grip of lust. And the Spirit empowers me to overcome temptation.

God offers me amazing, freeing, redeeming grace. When Jesus spoke to the woman caught in sexual sin, he said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and sin no more." And the Spirit enables me to live a free life—if I cooperate by doing my part. All this often happens in the context of the Christian community. As I walk with other brothers on the journey, as Jesus and his disciples walked together, there is hope.

To be free, an ancient writer points to the "virtue of the restraining power of self-control ... over the desires." Through self-control "emotions of the appetites are restrained" and the "impulses of the body are bridled." The same writer refers to Joseph when he prevailed against temptation: "It is for this reason, that the temperate Joseph is praised, because ... he overcame sexual desire. For when he was young and in his prime for intercourse ... he nullified the frenzy of the passions" and fled from temptation (4 Maccabees 1:30–2:3).

This involves more than keeping your garments on and your zipper up. It also involves how I look upon women. Jesus says, "*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 lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart*" (Matthew 5:27–28).

Here's where the vast majority of men are convicted at some point. I haven't committed adultery, but with most men, I've been guilty of looking upon women with lust. And along with most men, I've used pornography and, in so doing, have dishonored women and degraded God's great gift of sexuality.

To live a sexual life that is truly free, pure and loving, Jesus takes me to the heart of love by calling me to look

upon others and myself for who we truly are—beloved children of God. As such, we are not objects for lust but persons to love.

Yes, I may *notice* a woman's body. But if I *gaze* upon a woman, I want to look into her eyes to see her not as a to-be-lusted-after object of desire but a beloved daughter of God. For how I look at a woman will influence how I relate to her.

Like Jesus, I need to rely on God's Word and Spirit in prayer. I also need others to hold me accountable, share my struggles and receive support, particularly from other Christian brothers. I need to admit my problem to myself, to God and to another person in addition to my spouse. I must break the silence and the grip of my secrets, for there is freeing power in sharing with trusted friends. With God and others, I can address my deeper needs and hungers that make me vulnerable to lust.

Indeed, by God's grace and with the support of others, I can become a Christian man of integrity and honor women as daughters of God and my sisters in Christ.

### Discussion questions

1. What have you been taught about sexual passion?
2. How do you think about lust?
3. What have you been willing to trade or give up in order to satisfy your lust?
4. What helps you manage lust in your life?

#### 4. From *Playboy* to Healthy Sexuality

I finally tired of struggling to address my attraction to pornography through my own effort. While my attraction to web sites or R-rated movies, my primary outlets, ebbed and flowed over many years, I was aware that the material I viewed was becoming so predictable as to be somewhat boring. Yet I still returned to fuzzy movie channels and searches for nude actresses from time to time. I knew this was hindering my desire to follow Jesus and diluting a witness to His love that I might express. Also, I was afraid that my attraction might lead to more hard-core and even violent material to achieve a higher arousal.

A friend from church shared he was participating in a men's group focusing on a common attraction to pornography and a desire to live with sexual integrity. I eventually asked him about it and told him I had reached the point where I would consider more decisive action to help me confront this long-standing behavior. My friend said he would ask the other men about my attendance, and I began attending their regular meetings.

My history of struggle with pornography is probably familiar to others coming of age in the *Playboy* era. I found some magazines hidden in my older brother's room when I was about 12 and was soon sharing copies with friends who had their own stashes. After discovering masturbation about the same time, I moved into voyeurism that added the thrill of risking detection to the intermittent reinforcement of a late evening prowler. I was like many boys of my generation who participated in these exposures to explore the mysteries of female anatomy. My parents never did "the talk" with me about sex, but there was a book in my brother's library about the "facts of life" that helped clarify a few things that I had found puzzling.

Throughout high school and most of college, my sexual experience was limited to above-the-waist petting, occasional trips to R-rated movies, and viewing college women in varying stages of undress who were visiting my sisters. It was the pre-internet era, so again I primarily depended on *Playboy* for sexual stimulation. I came close to engaging in intercourse a couple of times but remained a technical virgin until marriage.

It took several years of marriage before I resumed seeking the additional stimulation of pornography. I don't lay any blame on my spouse, I just found it difficult to stay away from the magazines on the newsstands. I



also engaged in what to date are my last voyeurisms of women who were guests in our house. Then I discovered hotel movie channels on work-related trips, and video rentals in 1980s. Following this was cable at home with late-night movies, and finally the ever-available online material with a PC. I suppose I was viewing some women in some stage of nudity every few weeks for many years.

The men's group I attend is simply a place of accountability, where we share our behavior, both successes and failures, at each meeting. I have found this simple process to be an enormous help, as it has helped me intercept behavior heading toward pornographic material. I continue to "grab the door handle" of various web-page advertisements or cable channels that could lead to nude or revealing pictures, but have been able to avoid entering the room. For this I am very grateful.

Another aspect of my sexual life which I find more difficult to contain is a tendency to visually appraise women, imagining how they would look unclothed, or what they would be like as sexual partners. This pattern started long ago, and has intensified due to my spouse's disability making her sexually unavailable. So today I am basically living as a single person, at least as sexual expression is concerned, which increases the challenge of living a healthy sexuality. One friend told me it was OK for someone in my situation to find an alternative sexual partner. I thanked him for his concern, but told him I couldn't be unfaithful to my spouse and maintain any level of sexual integrity.

It seems the sexual attraction we feel for another person remains a conundrum for the Christian. It is part of God's plan to "be fruitful and multiply," and sexual intimacy if a gift of pleasure we can experience in a covenanted relationship. But scripture from Genesis to the pastoral letters warns how sex can damage us, our loved ones, and our neighbors when agape love is missing. And Jesus's strong words in the Sermon on the Mount, that we commit adultery in our heart if we look upon a



woman with lust, indicates how seriously we need to restrain the temptation to inspect the bodies of our sisters. Even though I haven't acted out on my fantasies, I long to break this long-standing habit and stand on more solid ground as a believer.

So with God's help and the support of a few brothers, I hope to continue progress toward a healthy sexuality relating to women, especially my sisters in Christ.

### **Discussion questions**

1. How has pornography impacted your relationships with women or men?
2. When does looking at a woman become lust?
3. If you have experienced losing a sexual partner, especially due to disability or death, how have you dealt with sexual desire?

## 5. Diminishing Returns

It started simply and innocently enough. But my sexually compulsive craving did not remain simple or innocent. And what I have been willing to do to satisfy it has changed over the years.

I was 10 or 11 years old at my friend's house when he showed me and a few other boys his older brother's stash of hidden porn magazines that he had found. I had never seen images of naked women before. The pictures prompted curiosity for me but not sexual arousal. What really got my attention was how excited the other boys were at this illicit find.

Three or four years later, and well into puberty, I too got excited about such nudity. But I really didn't know where to safely find it in the pre-Internet days. So I was delighted when I noticed that some common bathrooms used by other adults had rounded keyholes that allowed me to peek at female shower-takers when no one was around. The sights I saw, combined with the risk of being caught, gave me a bigger thrill than any magazine. The fact that the young women involved were family friends increased my shame, but I didn't stop.

My pattern of occasional voyeurism continued into young adulthood and even marriage. In high school at a company picnic of my dad's at a county park, I more or less camped out in the men's bathhouse peeking through a gap in the wall into the women's side, hoping to see women changing out of bathing suits. One of the women must have noticed me because I suddenly heard a chilling female voice saying, "Hi! You get off on that? Pervert!" I was petrified that the woman would notify the employees and someone would come looking for me. I waited in fear over half an hour before daring to sneak out of the bathhouse.

Later in Christian service assignments, both in the U.S. and internationally, I found ways to discreetly place myself where I might "accidentally" catch a glimpse of fleeting nudity. Of course, once catching a glimpse of a (partially) unclad woman, I would look for chances to return to that scene without drawing attention, wasting hours in the process. I finally stopped this risky behavior partly because I realized how terrible getting caught would be and, in all candor, because settling down with my wife in single-family dwellings gave almost no peeping opportunities. Thankfully, that urge has now almost totally disappeared.



But the voyeuristic impulse merely transferred itself back into my original temptation—pornography. With a job, wife and small children and still before the Internet, I had little exposure to porn and didn't indulge very often. Many months could go by between times when I would drop into an out-of-town convenience store or truck stop to furtively browse the porn magazines. I never bought any because that would be bad stewardship! Afterwards, I would always be wracked by shame, which could carry me for quite a while—until the next episode.

At grad school, I was finally brought to a point of getting serious about my problem when my wife angrily walked out to take a drive. She threatened to take the kids and go live with her parents if I continued devaluing her by looking at porn. This was hitting the bottom. I was so shaken that I sought trusted spiritual counsel in a wise elder who helped me see my sexual life and my spiritual life as closely connected realities, rather than as separate worlds where I was either morally "ontrack" or "offtrack." He referred me to a Sex Addicts Anonymous group meeting 45 minutes away. For a couple of years I attended there about monthly and, with embarrassment, came to the difficult conclusion that I was a sex addict.

That was the beginning of an up-and-down path of recovery, which has continued to this day through faith-based men's accountability groups over the last 20 years. As I began to read the writings of Patrick Carnes and Mark Laaser on sex addiction, I learned that this compulsion, like all addictions, tends to be progressive in nature. It follows what is sometimes called "the law of diminishing returns," whereby over time the same amount of a drug or the same kind of sexual activity no longer satisfies the addicted person, so he or she craves something more or different in order to achieve the same degree of pleasure.

I believed this progressive nature of addiction to be true, but I didn't really test the theory very much. My pattern of very occasionally looking at porn magazines remained stable. With an accountability group, I thought I was in a fairly good place, as sex addictions go: achieving "sobriety" for several months at a time and also not escalating into more destructive behaviors. For over 10 years, by the grace of God and with the help of a few Christian brothers, my sexual compulsions, while deeply shameful to me, seemed manageable.

And then came the Internet. I knew the Internet was dangerous for addicts, but I was pleased that it didn't appeal to me much in the early years. I think that was because Internet usage was not yet a societal norm and not part of my daily routines. Later when the family needed a computer at home with Internet access, I began to discover what was there by seeking out occasional R-rated movies when no one was home. I was glad I never accessed "Internet porn," but those movies began to obsess me more and more, largely due to their availability. So, with my wife's agreement, we installed a content-protection filter on the computer that would automatically notify my wife's email if I tried to go to objectionable sites. That computer has ceased to be a temptation for me at all.

When I first got a cell phone, I got a simple one for talking only. Later I got one just for talking and texting. Eventually, the benefits of a smartphone seemed to outweigh the dangers that I privately knew were there. Unfortunately, my home computer protection software, even when installed on my phone, has loopholes that I can easily get around. Having discovered this, the portability and convenience of the phone became an increasing problem for my addictive self. Because the material is so easy to access and "dispose of," I found myself medicating unpleasant feelings or boredom through my phone when no one was present. Initially it was only through explicit photos, and only when the house was completely empty. I continued to feel good that I hadn't lowered myself to watching porn videos.

I am very humbled to admit, however, that I am no exception to the law of diminishing returns. The same nude images that were once thrilling just because it was nudity are no longer exciting enough. While many online porn activities depicted are ones that instinctively disgust me, I began to give in to curiosity about videos. At first I tried to find ways to get to them through more "mainstream" sites, avoiding apparently obvious porn sites. But that resistance too started wearing away as the sheer novelty and abundance of materials pulled me into

their trap. I find myself sometimes almost fatalistic about giving in to compulsive behaviors that 10 years ago I told myself I would never do, like looking at porn late at night when family members are sleeping. Although I remain firmly resolved that my moral compass will stop me short of sexual activities with a woman other than my wife, I am now less self-righteous about saying there are some sexual things "I will never do." Now I am thankful if I can go two or three weeks with no porn slippages.

My Christian men's group remains a lifeline for me. I am inwardly less cocky about how I can "manage" these compulsions. I would even put it this way: In the Internet age, I probably would have already lost my church-related job and perhaps my family to this addiction if not for the regular accountability and encouragement I have received from these brothers. Such fears of loss of job and marriage are not unfounded. Through other recovery groups, I have known men whose addictions have cost them dearly.

The members of my current group have led me to sometimes take actions or set boundaries, for the sake of sexual integrity, that I wouldn't otherwise take. Inspired by their example, in the past year I found the courage to name (but not in great detail) my sexual addiction to my gracious young adult children, so as to not have such a huge personal secret hidden from them. This disclosure was an emotional experience for me—and helpful as well, I believe, for my children. My compulsivity in the area of sexuality is the single most humbling aspect of my life as a Christian leader, constantly reminding me of my need for God's grace.

## Discussion questions

1. Have you ever found yourself going farther than you intended with your sexual activities? If so, how have you dealt with it?
2. How do you understand why some individuals can go deeply into destructive behaviors and not be able to stop?
3. What personal familiarity do you have with the progressive nature of addictions, whether with substances or with sexual or other behaviors? You or a friend or family member?

## 6. Correcting Our Vision

Do I need to poke out my eyes or cut off my junk?

As a young, conscientious Christian I used to think this, taking literally what Jesus said about looking at a woman with lust and cutting off body parts that cause us to sin (Matthew 5:28–30).

Fortunately, I didn't turn to my pocketknife to solve my problem. But I tried really hard not to look at females with lust so that I could keep my eyes. Nevertheless, I failed and felt ashamed about looking at girls the way I did.

So I tried harder. I remember, for example, when our youth group went to an amusement park and how I consciously looked away every time a girl or young woman came into view. Yes, that was a long, frustrating day in the park! Later I was relieved to hear Tony Campolo tell a story about noticing women on a beach, then stating, "This doesn't mean you're a sinner, it means you're alive!"

Since then I've wondered, *Does it matter how I look at women? When does looking become lust? And is it OK to imagine having sex with someone other than my spouse?*

### **Does it matter how I look at women?**

As a heterosexual male, I naturally notice women. It's part of my God-given human instinct, the way I'm hard-wired. But my mind has been thoroughly conditioned by media presentations of females to view them according to certain standards of who is more desirable and who is less desirable. In all too many instances, this has a devastating impact on females.

Mary Pipher opened my eyes to this problem. In her book *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, Pipher exposes the traumatic impact of how most heterosexual males view females. She cites eating disorders, low self-esteem, shame, depression and other issues. She describes the problem as another destructive "ism." It might be termed "lookism"—evaluating others based solely on appearance. In other words, it's discrimination based on looks. When I do this I become a "lookist" and express my power as a male in a way that impacts females.

Worse yet is how my mind has been conditioned by pornography, training my eyes to look at women as sexual objects to satisfy my lust. When this happens, I don't see women for who they are as beloved daughters



of God but merely as bodies to use or fantasize about. This dehumanizes women, degrading them into playthings. As the concept of the "looking-glass self" recognizes, we tend to view ourselves as others view us.

After hearing how all this affects females (as many women share how painful it is), I realize that, yes, it matters how I look at women, which influences not only how I relate to them but also how they view themselves.

### **When does looking become lust?**

Jesus said, "Everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28). This teaching recognizes that there are different ways of observing women. There is looking, and there is looking "with lust."

I believe there's a continuum for how we look at women.

1. *Glance*: natural noticing. This doesn't indicate I'm sinful but alive.
2. *Look*: conscious observing. This is where choice enters in regarding what to do with my eyes.
3. *Stare*: focused looking. This can become a violation of the other's privacy.
4. *Lust*: sexual imagining. As Jesus said, this is mental fornication.

I think looking, staring and lusting increasingly lead to sexual objectification and violation. Recall the progression of how David looked at Bathsheba and the increasing level of violation, even leading to murder, that occurred (2 Samuel 11–12). So when I look, I would do well to notice how I am looking.

Knowing how quickly I can move from glancing to staring, I need a focal point. So when I look at women I try to focus on their face and specifically their eyes, the window into their soul. When I focus on breasts or butts, women become sexual objects, but when I focus on their eyes I am much more likely to see them for who they are as persons.

One of the most beautiful women I've ever seen was a young Amish woman. Her modest dress called my attention away from her body to her face, which helped me see her as a lovely daughter of God. This is how I want to see all women.

***Is it OK to imagine having sex with someone other than my spouse?***

Related to looking, there's the question of whom I look upon in my mind. It's tempting to imagine myself with former partners, women I know or those in pornography.

I recall talking about this question with a group of men. Most of them thought it was OK to imagine someone else rather than their wife when having sex. I didn't think my spouse would bless this, so I asked her. "Certainly not," she said, and suggested that men check with their wives to see if they're OK with this.

As I understand faithfulness to my spouse, it includes mental fidelity to her as my sole sexual partner. So I focus on her when we're sexually intimate, enjoying her and her alone. That's what she desires as well.

Given differences in our sexual desire I, like most men, occasionally masturbate. This is when pornography or imagining another person is especially tempting. In this case, I seek not only to be a "CO" (conscientious objector) but also a "CM"—that is, a conscientious masturbator. I fall short of this from time to time, but I usually recover and refocus on my partner in my mind when alone.

I have plenty of wonderful images and memories of her I can recall that satisfy my longing. (I don't know what this means for a single person committed to celibacy, but I wonder about having an imaginary partner rather than calling to mind a known person.)

***Finally, how we see is vitally important***

For those who follow Jesus, we believe that the core of his teachings is in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). It's interesting that at the exact center of his message we have these words: "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness" (Matthew 6:22–23). So much depends on our sight—how we see others *and* ourselves.

So how are we to see others and ourselves? As God's beloved daughters and sons, for that is who we are (1 John 3:1). This makes us all sisters and brothers in one human family. Keeping this in mind and my eyes focused

on her eyes help me see her—whoever she may be—for who she is as God's daughter and a person to respect.

Just as I rely on my prescription glasses to correct my vision, I rely on this truth to help me see others for who they are—and to look upon them with love, not lust.

Oh ... and there's one more person (as alluded to earlier) I need to look upon as God's beloved: myself. For when I fall short and give way to lust or pornography, I often feel deep shame and see myself as a piece of crap. In these moments, I need to recall who I am and see myself as God's beloved son.

**Discussion questions**

1. What do you notice about the way you look at others?
2. Do you think it matters how you look at women? Would those you look at agree?
3. As you see it, at what point does looking become a problem?
4. What helps you to look upon others with love and respect?



## 7. How Living into Our Calling Can Make a Difference

Since 2009 I've been part of a Christian men's group that focuses on sexual integrity and accountability—with complete confidentiality. We gather every two weeks at 5:45 a.m., concluding at 7 o'clock. As a night owl, I've found this a major personal stretch, but meeting with my brothers before the work/family day begins has become a significant biweekly spiritual discipline for me.

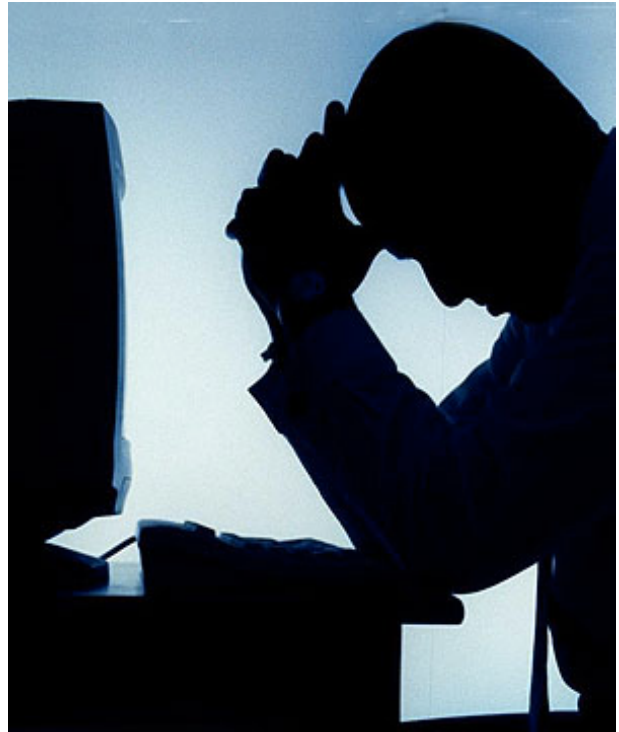
I said the group “focuses on sexual integrity and accountability,” and that it does. Those of us with addictions or addictive tendencies need the regular support of others. Confessing our sins—first to ourselves and God, then to others—is part of a humbling, yet healing, process that helps us be whole again.

In our group we also talk about other things of importance in our lives, including our work and sense of calling as Christian men. “Calling,” of course, takes many shapes and forms. It's as unique as each individual—and it ties in with Paul's descriptions of spiritual gifts and attributes in 1 Corinthians 12–14.

One of the most meaningful parts of my walk with Jesus involves a passion for justice—making the crooked straight and the rough places smooth (Isaiah 40:4 and Luke 3:5) as I seek to stand in tangible ways with the most vulnerable and marginalized among us. Yes, I have a vocation that generates income, but my principal avocation is working for justice. For me, “avocation” and “calling” are virtually synonymous.

*A Guide to Religious Ministries* (1996) describes spiritual calling this way:

Everyone is called to be with God. ... We are called by the providential arrangement of circumstances, by the realities of life, by our own limitations and potential, by the historical moment, and by our own emotional, intellectual and psychological needs. ... When people forget the divine and providential element in their lives, they try desperately to find a course through life like a man on a raft with neither rudder nor map. ... [T]he Lord gives each of us something to do, some work to perform that makes us an essential link in the chain of life.



Quite often in connection with my justice work I find myself in public-speaking roles, both scheduled and spontaneous. I also do writing that usually has a public component. Over the years—and especially the past eight in our men's group—I've discovered that there's significant dissonance between working for God's kingdom on the one hand and engaging in furtive sexual activity (not involving my wife) on the other.

Such activity has often involved pornography—from relatively mild to hard core—on the Internet in particular. Though I have “content protect” installed on my personal computer, there still tend to be ways to access some sexually explicit content for those of us intent on finding it. I would add that sexual impurity also can affect/infect our relationships as we sometimes look with “elevator eyes” at beautiful women, even in our church. And when we initiate or receive a “sisterly” hug, we sometimes can be subtly inappropriate.

Further, it isn't lost on me that one of the most unjust professions in the world is the porn industry where teenage girls and young women in particular are exploited shamelessly. Consumption of porn, in effect, helps perpetuate this culture of injustice.

What are we to do? How can we deal with these “disconnects,” these seemingly incongruent aspects of ourselves? Well, Romans 7:7–25 has been helpful to me. It's strangely reassuring that Paul (and many other biblical figures) also struggled with temptation and all too often fell short of the glory of God.

Regardless of the era—then or now—when we as mortals are out of touch with our Christian calling or callings, I think we’re much more susceptible to the lure of sexual sin. Just one biblical example: David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11–12).

In this vein I recall what a brave man in the church I attended 40 years ago stated publicly one morning. He recounted that he often was called upon to speak in churches and at conference meetings, but he usually had to take a plane to those gatherings. In airports—even more so then than now—magazine racks were generally packed with not only sexually suggestive publications but explicit ones.

The man said he frequently found himself leafing through the magazines while waiting for a flight. Then, several hours later or the next day, he was in front of an audience bringing his message, images from the magazines still swirling in his mind. He disclosed to the congregation that morning in the late '70s that he finally concluded that he couldn't do this anymore. The contradictory chasm between his airport activity and bringing a word from the Lord was simply too great.

He had found a strategy for dealing with his sexuality that helped him ... and doubtless the people he ministered to as well. Recently I saw him again, and he said, “I do praise God for the freedom he gave me.”

What has helped me is a growing understanding of the importance of moving ever more deeply into my sense of calling. In other words, even if I’m not doing public speaking (or preparing for it), I may be writing on matters I care passionately about. Or I might be in a church small group or have a one-on-one conversation with an individual regarding spiritual things.

In the midst of such times, the siren song of porn or impurity nonetheless may beckon (yes, temptation can suddenly rear its hydra heads when least expected). In those moments I can often respond, “I don’t need to go there.” And don’t. Why? Because that’s not who I am at my most foundational level—and because when I’m immersed in my life’s calling, I’ve found that I’m less inclined to engage in dehumanizing sexual activity and more drawn to pursuing my spiritual passions. Rather than fixating on our failings, we can be called forward into our life’s purpose.

Father Richard Rohr, author and teacher, in June 2017 was discussing Franciscan spirituality. He wrote that “both Jesus and Francis ... moved outside the system of

illusion, more by ignoring it than fighting it and quite simply [by] doing it better. They knew that ‘the best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better.’”

A very wise woman in our community died not long ago. At the worship service celebrating her remarkable life, her daughter read a quote from her mother (paraphrasing a Franciscan blessing): “God has blessed us with just enough foolishness to believe that we can make a difference in the world.”

As each of us takes steps to make that difference, by the grace of God, and as we seek to be “part of what it’s all about,” may the useless, destructive stuff increasingly fall away—because our calling, indeed, is calling.

### Discussion questions

1. What do you feel most called to in your life?
2. How have others affirmed certain gifts in you?
3. To what extent are you finding ways to deepen and live out your sense of calling—even in the midst of sexual temptation?
4. Are there other men with whom you could travel on this journey—either as an existing group or one that you could help form?