

# Freedom from the Power of Lust

By Luke Gilkerson

*“Sex has become the religion of the most civilized portions of the earth. The orgasm has replaced the Cross as the focus of longing and the image of fulfillment.”*

- Malcolm Muggeridge (British journalist)

Matthew is 23 years old, single, just graduated from college, a committed Christian—and feels helplessly out of control when it comes to pornography. He first saw porn when he was 11 years old—fairly average for a man of his generation—thanks to his dad’s computer and dial-up modem. Matthew can remember those first images like it was yesterday. In the beginning he was driven by an adolescent curiosity to the mysterious world of naked women. But it didn’t take long for masturbation and pornography to become inseparable in Matthew’s experience.

Matthew cannot remember the last time he went more than 3 or 4 days without masturbating, and since the beginning of college, *he cannot remember a week* going by without looking at some kind of pornography, even if only for a little bit.

If the stats are accurate, about half of Christian men of his age have a very similar story.

Ask Matthew if he has ever tried to stop, and he’ll tell you, “Many times.” He might be able to ward off temptation for a few days, maybe longer if he keeps himself busy, but each time he can feel the familiar temptation sweep over him like a thick fog entering his mind, clouding his every thought. Like a bloodhound, the temptation of pornography barks and scratches at the door of his mind until it has driven him mad by the sound of it. Like a siren song, it feels as if his heart is irresistibly drawn to lust. He says he hates his sin, but the thought of resisting doesn’t even make sense to him anymore. In a word, he feels hopeless. He has all but given up the fight.

## The Better Question

The details are different for each of us, but the core story is the same. Some of us are married, some single, some engaged—but for the porn addict, it doesn’t take long before this private fixation starts impact our real world relationships. For some their pornography addiction has led them down a very dark path of other sexual misconduct. For others, their addiction has caused their hearts to turn inward, prompting a long season of soul searching, self-help books, and every white-knuckle tactic they can think of. But for everyone the question is the same: *How can I stop?*

This is a good question, but it’s not the best question. It is easy when a particular sin takes over our lives to get tunnel vision: stopping *that sin* becomes an all-important goal to us. But “How can I stop?” is only a behavioral question. The Bible tells us that sin is not primarily a behavioral issue—though it includes our behavior. Sin is primarily a *heart* problem. “Heart” is the most comprehensive biblical term for what establishes our behavior, thoughts, desires, and life direction (Proverbs 4:23; Mark 7:21-23; Hebrews 4:12).

A better question might be: *How can my heart change?* What can be done to transform my internal motivations? At the center of this question is not just a desire to *stop* a certain habit, but the recognition that our hearts were created for something so much greater than the filth of pornography. We don’t just want to cease being porn addicts. We want our hearts to come alive with a greater affection.

## Recovery vs. Discovery

For some, the buzz word is “recovery”: we want to “recover” from our porn addiction. Recovery often refers to “going back” to something, regaining what was lost. But this is not the Christian vision for transformation. We do

not simply need to return to the way things were before the porn invaded our lives. We need to move forward. We need discovery, not recovery.

For some, the word “recovery” also defines the nature of the problem itself. We often use the word “recovery” to speak about something that has been *taken from us*. I recovered my stolen wallet. I had a heart attack, but I’m recovering well. I slipped on the wet ground but recovered my balance. I recovered my files after my computer crashed. I will sell my house when the market recovers. We cannot rightly use the word recovery (at least, in the same way) when we speak of pornography addiction. Porn is not merely an invader that stole our innocence. However ubiquitous porn is today, the real thief is not the mass producers of sexual media, but our own sinful hearts.

Strictly speaking, we cannot *recover* from something we are. We must be *remade* into something new.

### **A Light Healing**

Jeremiah the prophet warned the inhabitants of Judah that a time of judgment was coming. Idolatry and injustice were everywhere. Despite repeated warnings and calls to repentance, nothing substantial had changed. After generations of sin, God would level Jerusalem to the ground using a pagan army, and God’s children would be sent into exile.

In particular, God issued a strong warning to the wise men, prophets, and scribes in his day, saying, “They have healed the wound of my people lightly” (Jeremiah 8:11). Abomination was in their midst (v.12), but rather than stressing the seriousness of sin, they fed the people soothing lies their itching ears wanted to hear. This is what John Piper calls a “tragically light healing”:

I take this to refer to leaders who should be helping the church know and feel the seriousness of indwelling sin (Rom. 7:20), and how to fight it and kill it (Rom. 8:13). Instead the depth and complexity and ugliness and danger of sin in professing Christians is...psychologized as a symptom of woundedness rather than corruption.

This is a tragically light healing. I call it a tragedy because by making life easier for ourselves in minimizing the nature and seriousness of our sin, we become greater victims of it. We are in fact not healing ourselves. Those who say that they already feel bad enough without being told about the corruptions of indwelling sin misread the path to peace. When our people have not been taught well about the real nature of sin and how it works and how to put it to death, most of the miseries people report are not owing to the disease but its symptoms. They feel a general malaise and don’t know why, their marriages are at the breaking point, they feel weak in their spiritual witness and devotion, their workplace is embattled, their church is tense with unrest, their fuse is short with the children, etc. They report these miseries as if they were the disease. And they want the symptoms removed.

We proceed to heal the wound of the people lightly. We look first and mainly for circumstantial causes for the misery—present or past. If we’re good at it, we can find partial causes and give some relief. But the healing is light.

True, all the behavioral techniques in the world might take away our porn addictions, but at what cost? Our sinful hearts will simply gravitate toward something else, some other fix, perhaps some other habit—only this time it might be something more benign, easier to hide, and perhaps more respectable in the eyes of the church. Why settle for a light healing? Why not take the axe to the root of the tree?

### **A Ruthless Focus on the Cross**

The articles that follow offer the reader a look at the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross stands at the center of the Christian faith and at the center of the gospel Jesus proclaimed. This gospel is not merely something we believe upon becoming a Christian, only to move on to “bigger and better” theological quandaries. The gospel of the cross is something that stands at the center of our growth as Christians. It is only through the cross that the sins of our heart are finally killed.

For those who find this approach simplistic I would ask only for your patience. The cross of Christ can be grasped by the minds of children, but it is a revelation from God that will take you an eternity to unfold.

At the outset of the journey, join me in this simple prayer: “God, I may not know how to defeat my sin, but You do. I believe nothing can change me from the inside but Your Spirit. Jesus Christ, make Yourself real to me. Holy Spirit, attend my reading and take these truths into the very center of my heart. Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try my and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any evil way in me, and lead me in your everlasting path. Amen.”

## **The Cross Reveals God's Hatred of Lust**

When we really experience the drama of the cross, we begin to get a taste of God's utter hatred for sin.

Eternity will not be enough time for God to unfold to us the mystery of what happened to Jesus the day He died. The prophets had predicted it. Jesus Himself had anticipated it. But what Jesus went through on the cross cannot be adequately described in human terms.

For those of us who have grown up in western cultures, the symbol of the cross is a fairly familiar one...and perhaps too familiar. We see the cross worn as jewelry or lit up in neon. But 2000 years ago the cross was no decoration: it was an instrument of torture. Imagine what it might look like if you drove by a church, and instead of seeing a large cross displayed on the lawn, you see a 30-foot electric chair or, better yet, a replica of a medieval rack or iron maiden.

The image of a cross invoked similar feelings of dread and disgust to first century crowds. Historians from the time of Jesus called crucifixion the "most wretched" of deaths, something so altogether shameful, good Romans or Greeks didn't even speak about it.

### **The Pain of the Cross**

Leading up to Jesus' own crucifixion, he is bound by cold shackles and faces the injustice of a rigged trial and false witnesses. He is blindfolded and beaten mercilessly by His captors. The next morning He is taken to the Roman courts where He is stripped naked and scourged. The guards shackle His arms above His head and tenderize His back with their cat o'nines. Hooks from their whips rip into His flesh, sinking in deep enough to tear ligament and muscle, ripping His back and legs to shreds. He is marred to the point of being unrecognizable. Finally, in a mocking gesture, a crown of long thorns is pressed into His head as soldiers spit in His face.

Dehydrated and exhausted, a heavy cross-beam is laid on His back for Him to carry to Golgotha. Even Jesus, in the prime of life, is too weakened by His torture to walk the full distance unaided. Escorted out of the city, Jesus is laid on the splintery wood and 5-7-inch spikes are driven through the sensitive nerve centers on His hands and feet. The cross is lifted up for all to see. There He hangs for 6 hours like a scarecrow, needing to flex his elbows and push up on his nail-pierced feet in order to breathe. With each breath He experiences searing pain in each bruised joint and along each nerve.

The physical pain of the cross is only the beginning of the torture. Crucifixion is also a humiliating and shameful experience, a mode of execution reserved for barbarians and traitors. Jesus' execution is not private; it is done along the roadside leading to the capital city. Imagine today what it would look like to see a line of criminals being crucified along a major highway or in the parking lot of the local Walmart on Saturday afternoon. There Jesus hangs, probably naked, stripped of all dignity and respect. From the ground people hurl insults and mock His pain.

The whole crucifixion process was designed to make sure every victim suffered for as long as he or she could endure. In fact, our English word "excruciating" comes from the Latin root meaning "out of the cross." The cross is the definition of excruciating pain.

### **The Spiritual Torture**

But the worst pain of all is not the nails or the thorns or the mocking crowds. John, one of Jesus' own disciples, one who watched Him hang in agony for six hours, would later write that Jesus was the "propitiation" for our sins (1

John 4:9-10). "Propitiation" was a term used in ancient circles referring to appeasing a god, using some sort of sacrifice to turn away the wrath of that god, and thus win that deity's favor and good will. On the cross Jesus became a *sacrifice* to His heavenly Father.

What was this like for Him? Hundreds of years before, the prophet Isaiah predicted that when God's anointed Servant came, God would make Him into a sacrificial offering for our guilt (Isaiah 53:10). Peter, another disciple of Jesus, said that He "bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Peter 2:24). At some point on the cross, a divine transaction took place. God laid the sins of His people on Jesus and then turned all of His anger towards His own Son.

This same Jesus who had taught the crowds about God's anger against sin—who told them about hell's fiery torment, its never-ending thirst, and its outer darkness away from the presence of God and His glory—this same Jesus now hangs on the cross experiencing living hell. His strength is sapped like sun-baked clay as His tongue clings to his jaws. Jesus looks for a sign of God's smiling face, that beautiful face He had known all His life and for all eternity, but He sees nothing. At noon the sun suddenly vanishes from the sky and a mysterious darkness falls upon the land. God's face has turned away.

Finally, at 3:00 in the afternoon, Jesus cries out, "*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*" (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34). Recording these words in the mother-tongue of Jesus, it is as if the Bible authors are bringing us as close to the lips of Christ as possible. The cry is translated, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" These words reveal the greatest suffering in Christ's soul: the Father has forsaken the Son. Jesus is facing the outer darkness of God's silence, and it is pure torture.

Joni Eareckson Tada's description of this torture is most fitting:

From Heaven the Father now rouses himself like a lion disturbed, shakes his mane, and roars against the shriveling remnant of a man hanging on a cross. Never has the Son seen the Father look at him so, never felt even the least of his hot breath. But the roar shakes the unseen world and darkens the visible sky. The Son does not recognize these eyes.

"Son of Man! Why have you behaved so? You have cheated, lusted, stolen, gossiped—murdered, envied, hated, lied. You have cursed, robbed, overspent, overeaten—fornicated, disobeyed, embezzled, and blasphemed. Oh, the duties you have shirked, the children you have abandoned! Who has ever so ignored the poor, so played the coward, so belittled my name? Have you ever held your razor tongue? What a self-righteous, pitiful drunk—you, who molest young boys, peddle killer drugs, travel in cliques, and mock your parents. Who gave you the boldness to rig elections, foment revolutions, torture animals, and worship demons? Does the list never end! Splitting families, raping virgins, acting smugly, playing the pimp—buying pornography, accepting bribes. You have burned down buildings, perfected terrorist tactics, founded false religions, traded in slaves—relishing each morsel and bragging about it all. I hate, loathe these things in you! Disgust for everything about you consumes me! Can you not feel my wrath?"

Of course the Son is innocent. He is the model of blamelessness itself. The Father knows this. But the divine pair have an agreement, and the unthinkable must now take place. Jesus will be treated as if personally responsible for every sin ever committed.

The Father watches as his heart's treasure, the mirror image of himself, sinks drowning into raw, liquid sin. Jehovah's stored rage against humankind for every century explodes in a single direction.

"Father! Father! Why have you forsaken me?!"

But heaven stops its ears. The Son stares up at the One who cannot, who will not, reach down or reply.

The Trinity had planned it. The Son endured it. The Spirit enabled him. The Father rejected the Son whom he loved. Jesus, the God-man from Nazareth, perished. The Father accepted his sacrifice for sin and was satisfied. The Rescue was accomplished. (*When God Weeps: Why Our Sufferings Matter to the Almighty*, p.53-54)

### **Hating Sin as God Hates It**

If we ever think our sins aren't all that bad, if we ever need some proof that God really despises sin as much as the Bible says He does, we need look no further than the cross. If sin can be categorized as mere personality quirks or psychological weaknesses, then Jesus' death was needless. If we merely needed a spiritual boost or moral reform, then Jesus' death was senseless. Our sins are far more than symptoms of psychological wounds or personal failures. They are offenses worthy of hell.

We are meant to internalize the story of the cross and let it stir our affections, let it move us to hate our sin the way God hates it. Martin Luther understood this idea intimately when he said, "The whole value of the meditation of the suffering of Christ lies in this, that man should come to the knowledge of himself and sink and tremble."

This is a hard pill to swallow. In our culture we typically define sin along horizontal lines: what we do that harms or hurts our fellow man. But the Bible identifies the chief of sins along vertical lines: how we treat God. Do we worship our Maker as God, giving Him all of our affection, attention, and devotion? No. Instead we make idols for ourselves. We worship created things rather than our Creator.

Whatever we worship we will serve, for worship and service are always inextricably bound together. We are "covenantal" beings. We enter into covenant service with whatever most captures our imagination and heart. It ensnares us. So every human personality, community, thought-form, and culture will be based on some ultimate concern or some ultimate allegiance—either to God or to some God-substitute. Individually, we will ultimately look either to God or to success, romance, family, status, popularity, beauty or something else to make us feel personally significant and secure, and to guide our choices. Culturally we will ultimately look to either God or to the free market, the state, the elites, the will of the people, science and technology, military might, human reason, racial pride, or something else to make us corporately significant and secure, and to guide our choices...

Sin isn't only doing bad things, it is more fundamentally making good things into ultimate things. Sin is building your life and meaning on anything, even a very good thing, more than on God. Whatever we build our life on will drive us and enslave us. Sin is primarily idolatry. (Tim Keller, "Talking About Idolatry in a Postmodern Age")

Ultimately what underlies a fixation on pornography is some form of idolatry. For one guy the idol might be the porn images themselves. This is garden-variety lust: a fascination with the female form that compels someone to take the second, third, and fourth glances, consumed with the image of her—worshipping her. For another person the idol might be something the fantasy woman gives him in his imagination: approval, respect, a desire to be loved, a desire for companionship, comfort, pleasure, control, or power.

God hates idolatry not just because our idols leave us feeling empty (which they do), but because idols are God-replacements. The cross is God's greatest revelation to us of the unsightliness of our sin in God's eyes. When we wince at the mangled image of Christ bleeding on the cross, we get only a taste of God's response to our sin. John Calvin said it best: "When we behold the disfigurement of the Son of God, when we find ourselves appalled by His marred appearance, we need to reckon afresh that it is upon ourselves we gaze, for He stood in our place."

## The Cross Reveals the Depths of God's Love for the Sexually Broken

The cross reveals us for what we are: rebels cut off from a Holy God. But this is only the bad news. The good news is that the Creator God actually pursued these rebels and took away the sin that separated us from Him. John Stott beautifully sums it up in his book, *The Cross of Christ*:

The essence of sin is we human beings substituting ourselves for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for us. We...put ourselves where only God deserves to be; God...puts himself where we deserve to be.

The great drama of the cross does not end just with Jesus' dying breath. Matthew's Gospel tells us Jesus cries out in a loud voice, yielded up His spirit, and at that very moment the veil of the temple in Jerusalem is torn from top to bottom. The earth shakes, the rocks split, and the people stand in awe (Matthew 27:50-53).

Matthew connects the loud cry of Jesus with the miraculous events shake the physical world around Him. What does He cry out? Luke tells us that Jesus shouts, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). John says Jesus, knowing His mission is accomplished, says, "It is finished" (John 19:30).

These cries from the cross are not the weak, feeble whispers of a man who is giving up the fight. No one is taking Jesus' life from Him. He is laying down His life of His own accord (John 10:18). And though the world around Him mocks, He is confident in the purpose for which He dies. He cries, "It is finished." The last drop of God's wrath was consumed, and the debt of our sins was paid in full.

### The Torn Veil

Outside the city wall, the Son of God breathes his last as His body falls limp on the splintery wood. At that very moment, inside the city, a great miracle occurs. The massive curtain that separates the Holy of Holies from the other public chambers in the Temple is ripped in two from top to bottom. This beautiful veil fashioned from blue, purple, and scarlet material, and embroidered with the figures of cherubim angels—the guardians of God's heavenly throne—is literally destroyed. This veil—60 feet tall, 30 feet wide, and 4 inches thick—was a massive symbol of our separation from the Holy God of Israel. On the threat of death, almost no one was allowed to go behind the veil to approach the throne of God.

But all of that changed the day Jesus died. To be sure, God is just as majestic and holy, just as worthy of our fear and awe, but Jesus' death has made a way to His throne. God no longer asks for the blood of bulls and goats to appease His wrath. The perfect sacrifice has been made. The old ordinances under the Law of Moses that separated the common people from God's presence is abrogated, and the sin that once separated us from God is removed. The promise of the New Covenant is fulfilled: "I will remember their sins no more."

This truth has a profound impact on the sexually broken. Somewhere in our fractured souls, the law of God is stamped upon us, and we all feel the conflict within, sensing the fickle accusations from our own consciences (Romans 2:15). For those who have ever been trapped in pornography and other sexual addictions, we feel the stain of our sin. Our guilt clings to us like a wet blanket. Why would God want *me* in His presence? What would a holy God have to do with such a wretched sinner? God, you don't know me! You don't understand what I've done, the thoughts I've entertained, the lusts I've harbored, the mental adulteries I've committed!

But the dying breath of Jesus and the torn veil shatters any private illusion that our sin is somehow too much for God to forgive. And when the devil or our own condemning hearts point their accusing fingers at us, we can stand secure knowing that our sin is paid in full and we are now the Beloved of God.

Charles Spurgeon's words are appropriate here:

It seems natural enough that the earth should quake, that tombs should be opened and that the veil of the temple should be rent, when He who only has immortality gives up the ghost. The more you think of the death of the Son of God, the more will you be amazed at it...

Come boldly to the Throne of Grace. Jesus has made you near, as near to God as even He Himself is. Though we speak of the holiest of all, even the secret place of the Most High, yet it is of this place of awe, even of this sanctuary of Jehovah, that the veil is rent. Therefore, let nothing hinder your entrance. Assuredly no Law forbids you. But infinite love invites you to draw near to God...

For Believers the veil is not rolled up but rent. The veil was not unhooked and carefully folded up and put away so that it might be put in its place at some future time. Oh, no! The Divine hand took it and rent it from top to bottom. It can never be hung up again. That is impossible. Between those who are in Christ Jesus and the great God there will never be another separation. "Who shall separate us from the love of God?" Only one veil was made and as that is rent, the one and only separator is destroyed. I delight to think of this. The devil himself can never divide me from God now. He may, and will attempt to shut me out from God—but the worst he could do would be to hang up a rent veil.

### **True and False Intimacy**

Only against the backdrop of God's holy anger at sin is His love truly understood. Why, in the face of all my rebellion and idolatry, would He send His only Son to earth to undergo His wrath in my place? What love is this? Only against the backdrop of black velvet is the beauty of a diamond truly seen.

God's amazing love seen in the cross transforms and fulfills our desire for intimacy, which so often drives us to pornography in the first place. Many times, those who cling to pornography and sexual gratification do so out of a desire for intimacy, for closeness to another person. It is a twisted and sinful outworking of our craving for love. We want to be wanted, needed, attractive, desired. However natural this desire may be, in our sinful hearts this craving is nothing short of idolatry: we desire the affection of others so much that it becomes central to who we are and how we behave.

In our fantasies we can imagine ourselves as we have always wanted to be. Porn may provide a new cast of characters, settings, and plot-lines, but in our fantasies we are always the directors, producers, and main characters. We are the star of the show. The women are merely props that make us feel desirable, manly, or irresistible. What we often call a desire for intimacy is not a desire for true intimacy at all, but rather a yearning for someone to be infatuated with *us*. In these fantasies we are gods. We populate these fantasy worlds with female worshipers who go to great lengths to show us the level of their devotion.

The cross reveals these fruitless grasps for satisfaction for what they are: depersonalizing, self-centered, and loveless. The love of God revealed in the cross shatters our illusions about what love really is. Staring into Jesus' bloody face, we see a kind of love we never thought possible. And as we meditate on the wild and tender love of God, our hearts begin to overflow with passion as we know that we are truly loved by Him.

## The Cross Replaces Our Lust with a New Passion

The night before His death, Jesus kneels in silence as the full moon lights the olive grove. The weight of the world is on His shoulders. Knowing the physical and spiritual torture that awaits Him, He tells His closest disciples, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death." Falling on His face, he asks His Father, if it is possible, to let this cup of wrath pass from Him. He does not want to drink it.

Philip Yancey writes of this night:

Jesus was by no means powerless. If he had insisted on his will and not the Father's, he could have called down twelve legions of angels (72,000) to fight a Holy War on his behalf. In Gethsemane, Jesus relived Satan's temptation in the desert. Either time he could have solved the problem of evil by force, with a quick stab of the accuser in the desert or a fierce battle in the garden. There would be no church history—no church, for that matter—as all human history would come to a halt and the present age would end. All this lay within Jesus' power if he merely said the word, skipped the personal sacrifice, and traded away the messy future of redemption. No kingdom would advance like a mustard seed; the kingdom would rather descend like a hailstorm.

Yet...the cross, the 'cup' that now seemed so terrifying, was the very reason Jesus had come to earth. [John Howard Yoder writes,] "Here at the cross is the man who loves his enemies, the man whose righteousness is greater than that of the Pharisees, who being rich became poor, who gives his robe to those who took his cloak, who prays for those who spitefully use him. The cross is not a detour or a hurdle on the way to the kingdom, nor is it even the way to the kingdom; it is the kingdom come."

After several hours of torturous prayer, Jesus came to a resolution. His will and the Father's converged. "Did not the Christ have to suffer these things?" is how he would later put it. He woke his slumberous friends one last time and marched boldly through the darkness toward the ones intent on killing him. (Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*)

### The Incomparable Christ

The cross reveals the amazing character of Christ. Note His relative silence during His trial, torture, and death. Many crucifixion victims would curse the jeering crowds. But not Jesus. Weakened, beaten, bloody, and humiliated before the mob, Jesus looks down on His executioners and says, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

Hanging from the cross Jesus seems to pay more attention to others than His own pain. He takes time to assure a repentant revolutionary of His place in Paradise. He comforts His grieving mother and beloved disciple staring up at Him from the blood-stained ground.

But most astonishing is His willingness to be on the cross in the first place. Earlier the disciples marveled at how Jesus "set His face to go to Jerusalem" knowing of the execution that awaited Him (Luke 9:51; Mark 10:32; John 10:17-18). His unflinching obedience to His Father's will is so staggering, decades later the apostle Peter would still be amazed at how fervently Jesus entrusted Himself to God in the face of unspeakable pain, injustice, and shame (1 Peter 2:23).

The cross not only shows us Jesus' faith and character, it also reveals His infinite worth. From one perspective we should marvel at the intensity of Christ's sufferings. But we should also marvel at their brevity. Imagine it: millions of sins from countless human hearts, from every age of human history, past and future, each sin deserving of an eternity of wrath, all placed on one man...and yet it only took 6 hours to drain the cup dry! What man is this who can quench an all-consuming fire!

## The Expulsive Power of a New Affection

The more we meditate on the character and worth of the God-man, Jesus Christ, the more He will become our great desire, replacing our sinful cravings with holy ones. The pleasures of sin are pleasures indeed, but they are fleeting. This is not true of Christ: he is the fountain of *living waters*.

The apostle Paul promises us that we will not fulfill the desires of our sinful nature when we keep in step with the Spirit of God (Galatians 5:16). Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit too has desires, cravings, longings—and He shares those longings with us. We do not quench sinful desire by *denying* desire altogether, but by redirecting our desires to the One who is truly desirable.

The Scottish minister, Thomas Chalmers, articulated similar thoughts in his famous sermon, “The Expulsive Power of a New Affection.” In this message Chalmers seeks to answer the question: How do we remove a love of the world from our hearts? Chalmers argues that if we simply focus on the vanity of worldly desires, if we simply try to convince ourselves that the world is not worthy of our affections, we would be like empty machines, “in a state of most painful and unnatural abandonment.” A vacancy of desire is as painful to the heart as hunger is to the stomach. The heart revolts against emptiness. “Such is the grasping tendency of the human heart, that it must have a something to lay hold of,” Chalmers says.

We do not defeat the power of pornography merely by reminding ourselves of how deplorable porn is. We must replace our desires, not just divert them. When it comes to battling with pornography, we need a greater affection to take control of our hearts. What is this more alluring object that can so capture our hearts? Chalmers says it is Jesus Christ Himself as we behold Him in the gospel. We must meditate on “the blended holiness and compassion of the Godhead” in the mysterious act of atonement on the cross. “We know of no other way by which to keep the love of the world out of our heart, than to keep in our hearts the love of God.”

The cross is the pinnacle of God’s revelation to us of all his glorious attributes: His holiness, power, wrath, tenderness, compassion, justice, mercy, and love. It is because we lack this vision of God that we turn to other passions like pornography and lust. John Piper says it best:

One of the reason why our church, every church, all this culture are *awash* in lust, pornography, and every manner of sexual perversion is that we are intellectually and emotionally disconnected from shocking, stunning, divine, absolute, staggering Grandeur. We are, in fact, so awash that we've become *fish* who don't even dream about air anymore—we are so at home in the water of triviality, pettiness, banality, and silliness...

I argue that it is inevitable that a human heart which was made to be staggered by terrifyingly, joyous dread and peace—and by an infinitely untouchable, embracing, holy God—it is inevitable that a human heart made for that, swimming in this [world]...*must choose the best buzz it can get!* And sex is best. You've got no choice. You are absolutely a dog in heat, disconnected from staggering, glorious, mind-blowing divine reality.

And we have lost our capacity to know we miss it...The best buzz you can imagine is pornography or the real thing. It is inconceivable to you that there might be a power of soul, and an energy, and an engagement with something so great, so glorious, so pure, so divine—that it would create a ruggedness, and a power, and a zeal, and a firmness, and a depth in you—*you could say NO!*”

## The Cross Reveals the Ultimate Death of our Lust

The Hebrew prophets looked with eagerness to the day when God would ratify a new covenant among His people, a new creation. The New Testament looks to the same ultimate hope: one day God will re-create the world anew to reflect the fullness of His glory. One day God will literally “resurrect” the world, putting an end to sin, sickness, and death. One day Jesus will sit on an earthly throne and make this world our righteous home. He will raise God’s children from the dead and we will live forever in His kingdom.

But according to the apostle Paul, the new creation has already begun in some manner. The death and resurrection of Christ were not just historical events; they were also significant events that mark *the end of an age*, the dawning of a new age. He calls Christ’s resurrection the “firstfruits” of all the bodily resurrections that will take place when He returns (1 Corinthians 15:20). In a very significant way, we can say that the time of the final resurrection has *already begun*—in Christ. Jesus reigns now at the right hand of God’s throne in heaven (Hebrews 1:3). The Messiah’s rule over the world has *already started*. We have entered the Messianic age even though the current age still continues. We live in the *overlap*: the dwindling of this world and the emergence of the new.

### Christ Died to Sin

In this age we know what it is like to be under the dominion of sin. Within us we feel the urges of our selfish hearts, our bent on idolatry and lust. All around us we hear a thousand voices calling us away from God and pushing us toward worldly amusements. Above us a demonic horde seeks to drag us to hell along with them. We long to feel the powers of the coming age break into our lives.

But Paul tells us when Jesus died on the cross 2000 years ago, “the death He died *He died to sin*, once for all” (Romans 6:10, italics added). Think about that: How did *Christ* die to sin? Christ was sinless. He always perfectly pleased the Father. But nonetheless, in His humanity He was tempted in all ways as we are (Hebrews 4:15). He was born as a man into this evil age, rubbing shoulders with sinners every day, living in the muck of sinful culture. The devil seized opportune moments to entice the Him to rebel against His Father (Luke 4:13). Though He was faithful to the end, Jesus felt the weight of our sinful world. He also felt the weight of the guilt of our sin on the cross. Christ was never personally guilty of any sin, but He experienced the weight of our condemnation as all our sins were placed on his shoulders.

But as Jesus died on the cross, He died to sin. He died to this sinful age. After His death and resurrection, sin could no longer touch Him. The devil could no longer tempt Him. The world could no longer try to divert His attention from the love of God. Death could no longer threaten Him. He will never again return to the cross where he felt the heaviness of our sin. From that day forward He began to live a true, full, resurrection-life: the life of the age to come.

### You Died to Sin

Christ died to sin: what relevance does this have for the man struggling with lust? Everything. Though we still physically live in this age, and we still deal with sin’s *presence*, we are united to the living Christ and therefore share in His freedom from sin’s *power*. Paul teaches believers: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:3-4). Just as sure as Christ died to sin, we who are united with Him have His resurrection-life flowing in our spiritual veins.

This is why Paul could so confidently claim that although he was not yet perfect (Philippians 2:12), and although he still experienced the lure of sin at every turn (Romans 7:13-24), he was nonetheless “crucified with Christ”

(Galatians 2:20). This was an expression of Paul's faith concerning his union with Jesus. Because Jesus' break with this sinful world was *so final* and *so absolute*, and because Paul knew He had the Spirit of the living Christ within him, Paul also knew he was no longer under the dominion of sin. Paul had become a different person. Paul was a "new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

As Christians, our fundamental identity has totally changed. Often we define who we are based on our most significant relationships: I am a father, a husband, a manager, a teacher. Each of these not only state what I *do*; they state who I *am* in relation to others in this world. For Paul, knowing the Holy Spirit of Christ had taken up residence in him, this completely altered his identity. Paul was no longer just a Pharisee, a teacher, a Hebrew—he was "in Christ." This was all that mattered.

Similarly, as Christians we still have a tendency to define ourselves by our relationship to sin: I am a porn addict. I lust. I am tempted. Paul says this fundamental identity must change. If the risen Christ is in you, then you are His. Often the reason why we fall into sin and temptation is because we don't trust in the vitality of our union with Christ. We are so easily convinced sin still has its ugly claws in us, when in reality, sin has been declawed.

To put it in Paul's terms, he said, "reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:11, NKJV). Other translations say *count yourselves*, or *consider yourselves* dead to sin. In other words, "You already believe that *Christ* is dead to sin, and that you are *united to Him* through the Holy Spirit. So reckon *yourself* also as dead to sin: dead to this age which is passing away, dead to the lure of sin in your body, dead to the voices of your culture that try to shape your values, dead to the demonic rulers that grasp at control over this world. If you really believe the new and glorious age has already dawned in Christ, then reckon yourself dead to sin's power."

In other words, we experience freedom from sin by faith, a *reckoning* faith. We meditate on the climactic events of Christ's death and resurrection. We remember that Jesus' resurrection anticipates the world to come, a world without sin. Then in faith we *reckon ourselves* a part of that coming age. Putting it simply, we fight sin with what the New Testament calls *hope*.

### **Faith that Fights Sin**

As human beings, we are wired for hope—for expectation, for anticipation. Lust is often so powerful because it holds out to us a promise of reward. When we become sexually excited by what we see or by memories of what we've seen, we begin anticipate pleasure. It is not merely the *pleasure* we want: we love the *anticipation*. When looking for pornography, we don't just want to rush to the finish line and experience the climax of orgasm. We love to drag out the experience. Why? Because it isn't just about the final pleasure. It is about heightened expectation we feel along the way.

Blaise Pascal used the example of the compulsive gambler. Is he merely after the winnings? No, because if you gave him what he might win as a gift (on the condition that he can't gamble with it) he wouldn't take it. Is he merely after the playing of the game? No, because without the prospect of winning, the game ceases to be amusing. Rather, the gambler loves holding on to the *fantasy* that winning will make him happy. The gambler really doesn't just crave the "big win," but the experience of *hoping* for the big win. But when he wins, his contentment does not last, and he moves on to the next rush.

What the gospel does is it replaces our futile hopes with a living hope. Instead of being fueled by anticipations of sinful pleasure, we are fueled by the hopes of "pleasures forevermore" at the right hand of God (Psalm 16:11). Hope is so central to the Christian life that faith is not real faith unless it contains hope. It is how the Bible defines faith: "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). Real faith is that disposition in our hearts that makes the things we long for seem real to us, a deep conviction that enables us to feel and act as if the things we hope for are real—because they are.

So in this way, a hope-filled faith is a sin-fighting faith. Anticipating the joys of the world to come, we fight to taste that joy now. It is the same faith Moses had, which prompted him to refuse “the fleeting pleasures of sin” in Pharaoh’s household, “for he was looking to the reward” (Hebrews 11:24-25). As John Piper says: “Faith is not content with ‘fleeting pleasures.’ It is ravenous for joy.”

### **Making It Practical**

To summarize:

- Christ died to sin on the cross, meaning He made a decisive break with this sinful world and now experiences the blessings of the age to come in His resurrection and exaltation.
- We are united to Him by the Spirit of Christ, and therefore He shares His resurrection power with us. We are still surrounded by the *presence* of sin but have been released from the *power* of sin.
- We experience this power by faith, reckoning ourselves dead to this sinful age and alive with hope for the age to come, when sin will be completely vanquished.

This is where we must harness the power of the Word of God. We must lay hold of God’s promises and fully put our hope in them, knowing that in time our desires will follow. Just like Jesus in the wilderness, we counter temptations from the devil with the truth of God’s word (Matthew 4).

Find those promises in the word of God that link the command to stay sexually pure with our ultimate hope:

- When we are tempted to venture into “gray areas” of sexual sin, we should say aloud to ourselves, “*But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints...For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God*” (Ephesians 5:3,5).
- When we are tempted to be lazy in our spiritual lives and relax God’s holy standards, we must say aloud, “*Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’*” (1 Peter 1:13-16).
- As we come across sexually tempting images or situations we must say aloud to ourselves, “*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God*” (Matthew 5:8).
- When we are tempted to walk in darkness, we should say to ourselves, “*For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night...But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober...For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him*” (1 Thessalonians 5:2,4-6,9-10).
- When we feel our hearts groan under the weight of our own sin and this sinful world, we should say aloud, “*we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies*” (Romans 8:23).

These are just a few examples. There are many more. Commit them to memory. Meditate on them. Think about what they mean. In this way we will reckon ourselves dead to sin and alive to God.

## The Cross Ushers Us into a New Community

The temple in Jerusalem in Jesus' day was a magnificent structure. The Court of the Gentiles that surrounded the temple-proper was over 500,000 square feet paved with the finest variegated marble. In that Court, people from any nation in the world could gather as they came to Jerusalem to worship the God of Israel.

From within the Court of the Gentiles, gathering worshipers could see the inner temple courts elevated several steps higher, but no Gentile was allowed to approach. A surrounding stone barricade separated Gentile men and women from the inner courts, reserved only for Jews. Signs printed in Greek and Latin bore the inscription, "No foreigner may enter within the barrier and enclosure round the temple. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death."

This wall was one of many marks in Jewish culture and religion of the utter separation between Jew and Gentile. In fact, in many places throughout the Roman Empire, the animosity between Jew and Greek was considerable. William Barclay writes,

[T]he Jew had an immense contempt for the Gentile. The Gentiles, said the Jews, were created by God to be fuel for the fires of hell. God, they said, loves only Israel of all the nations that he had made...It was not even lawful to render help to a Gentile mother in her hour of sorest need, for that would simply be to bring another Gentile into the world...The barrier between them was absolute. If a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl, or if a Jewish girl married a Gentile boy, the funeral of that Jewish boy or girl was carried out. Such contact with a Gentile was the equivalent of death.

This alienation was partially cultural and ethnic, but much of it was also spiritual. The separation did not stem purely from bigotry or racism, but from very clear commands in the Mosaic Law for the separation of the children of Israel from the rest of the world. Circumcision marked the males who were officially part the covenant community. Peculiar dietary restrictions and modes of dress made socializing with Gentiles difficult. Gentiles were forbidden in Israel's civil law from participating in certain community worship gatherings—at least until they were fully engrafted into the community of Israel by conversion.

Conversely, Romans and Greek-speakers also felt their own sense of animosity toward outsiders. Non-Greek-speakers were generally viewed as barbarians. Romans generally saw people in three classes: non-citizens, free citizens, and slaves. Jews were not only predominantly non-citizens; they were also looked upon with some disdain because they were outside the typical religious order. Plus, the history of political tensions between Judea and Rome certainly added fuel to the fire.

These were some of the cultural tensions in the first century, and yet all around the Empire, Jews and Greeks alike were coming together into the community of the church. What accounted for this unlikely unity? How did God make these unlikely groups into one family?

### Unity by the Cross – Ephesians 2:11-18

Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus:

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making

peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

Paul is quite aware of the “dividing wall of hostility” between Jew and Gentile. He may, in fact, be alluding to the very wall that was in the Temple courts, the stone barrier that not only divided Gentile from Jew, but also separated Gentile from God. Paul reminds his Gentile readers: You were once cut off from the covenant people of God, outside of the community of Israel. This separation was not merely social: it was spiritual.

To be in the covenant community of Israel was to be in covenant relationship to *God Himself*. But outside this community, Paul says, Gentiles were *Christless* (no hope in a coming Messiah), *stateless* (outside God’s covenant blessings to Israel), *promiseless* (no covenant relationship to God at all), *hopeless* (no expectation of eternal life), and *Godless* (no way or desire to know the true God).

But all that changed after Jesus came. Paul says to the Gentile Christians: you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. The cross of Christ was the perfect altar. Christ was the perfect sacrifice. The blood of Christ, unlike the blood of bulls and lambs slain in the Temple, ratified a *New Covenant* between God and His people. This New Covenant brought about a major shift, “abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances.” No longer are the people of God demarcated by various external ordinances: a temple of wood and stone, an earthly priesthood, and ceremonies that divide clean from unclean. United to Christ, both Jews and Gentiles in the church are pardoned from all their sins and are reconciled to God.

Flowing from this peace with God is *peace with one another*. There is now no more reason for enmity between Jews and Gentiles in the church. The dividing wall of hostility was demolished, as it were, and now every race of men can flood across the rubble, united under the worship of the one true God.

This unity did not come about because of *uniformity*. Christ did not accomplish this unity by commanding the Gentiles to become more “Jewish” or vice versa. He accomplished this by creating in himself “one new man in place of the two,” a *new humanity* with Christ Himself at the head. In this new community there is great diversity of backgrounds, languages, cultures, and private opinions—but all are united by a common worship, marked by the Holy Spirit as children of the Most High God.

### **Community and Personal Transformation**

Christianity was never meant to be lived in isolation. One of the greatest means God has provided for our sanctification and growth is the instrument of the church—the people of God. The cross of Christ has not only brought us near to God, but also by virtue, brought us near to one another.

For those who struggle with pornography and lust, understanding this unity is vital because it opens our hearts to experience all the means of grace God has provided for us in the community of the church. Understanding this unity demolishes our fears about seeking help within the church for our sin.

When you sit across from another believer, you are not merely looking at another fellow human being with their own peculiar quirks and idiosyncrasies. You are speaking with someone who is indwelt with the Spirit of the Living God. Together you are stones in God’s magnificent temple. You are sharing space with someone who has been uniquely gifted by God’s Spirit. As CS Lewis said, “There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.” You are united by something far more significant than anything that might divide you.

We are called to practice the means of grace God has given to the *whole community* of Christ.

### **1. The Grace of Confession and Accountability**

Nothing slays the power of sin like confession. James writes, “Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed” (James 5:16). In confessing our sins to God we are promised forgiveness. In confessing sin to others we are healed.

Why do we fear confession? We fear it because we fear one another. I am still driven by what my neighbor thinks of me. Because of this fear of man, I dress up my life in religious garb hoping no one will notice my most gruesome flaws. I avoid transparent communication because it means others will see who and what I really am—and this opens me up to the loss of respect or admiration.

For some this fear leads to the evasion of confession altogether. Conversations stay on the surface and certain Christian gatherings are simply avoided. Others pacify their consciences with partial confessions, revealing only some of the dirty truth. Details are omitted. Surface information is highlighted. Others rotate their confessions from brother to brother, never giving one person a full picture of how they are doing. Others couch their sin in overtly general terms.

The cross of Christ enables us to bravely bring our sins into the light. When we see ourselves not just a slightly flawed creatures that need a moral boost, but as rank sinners, each capable of the vilest offenses, we know every sin we confess is covered by Christ’s perfect blood. The cross also exposes the man sitting across from me as being in the same position. The playing field is leveled.

A church gripped by the cross will be filled with *unshockable realists*: every time we share our escapades into vile sin, we will not be met with blank stares or disgust, but with looks of compassion. While not every brother may identify with your particular struggle, any brother gripped by the cross knows something of the evil a human heart can create. Confessing sexual sin may feel shameful, but it should never shock someone who lives in the shadow of the cross.

Sin must be *habitually* exposed to the light of confession. This is called *accountability*: being honest with another believer about our temptations, sins, and the state of our heart. Like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, after eating of the forbidden fruit, our knee-jerk reaction is to hide—to hide from God and from one another. Accountability is the willingness to habitually and regularly allow others access to knowledge of your heart, your motives, your secret desires, your dark thoughts, and, of course, your sinful actions.

Someone gripped by the cross also wants to help draw others out of hiding. Jon Acuff talks about giving people “the gift of going second.” When some brave person is willing to share their story first, this gives the rest of the church the gift of going second. When one person is willing to say, “I love you enough to crucify my public image and get real with you,” this motivates others to be honest themselves. In the shadow of the cross, a church or a small gathering of Christians can safely expose their sin.

Someday, “Each of us will give an account of himself to God” (Romans 14:12). Someday you and I will stand before the One whose eyes are like fire, who sees everything inside us, who cannot be fooled. Granted, if we are united with Christ we will enter into the full blessings of eternal life, but we will still give an account to Him 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.

## **2. The Grace of Gospel Motivation**

Confession of sin is not the only goal of Christian community. In the face of each other’s weaknesses, we need to encourage one another to fight sin. The author of Hebrews says, “let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:24-25).

We are called to “stir up” one another—that is, to urge, to spur on, to provoke, to motivate each other—to love and good deeds. We are to “consider,” or fix our minds on, how we can do this. Each time we meet together we should be contemplating and praying, “God, show me how I can really motivate my friend to forsake all self-obsession, to love God and others wholeheartedly.” We are to have a hardcore intentionality and thoughtfulness in our friendships.

We are called to “encourage” each other. This can also be translated “beseech.” It is a verb that involves *speaking* for sure, but first and foremost it means *calling someone to your side*. It is more than words of instruction, though it may involve instruction. It is more than correction, though it may involve correction. It is more than comforting, though it may involve words of comfort. It is first about being fully *with* someone.

Often this is the frustration when it comes to confessing our sins and addictions. It is easy to feel like we’re sitting in a room of preachers and therapists. Often when we are discouraged, tempted, or defeated we don’t want a sermon. We want someone to sit and listen. We want someone to just be *with* us, to feel the frustration and pain in our gut. We want someone to weep with us before they preach to us.

This verb, “encourage,” avoids two great extremes between Christian brothers. The first extreme is a harsh, legalistic, “cop” mentality. A cop is someone who is just looking over your shoulder for you to screw up. Accountability cops are those who have come up with very religious and sanitized ways of being a jerk to someone. 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.

The other extreme is wimpy accountability. Perhaps you’ve experienced this in the church. 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 we’re looking for absolution, not change. We just want to commiserate with someone over our sin and get something off our chest. We trade the peace of God in our hearts for a cheap peace. But real accountability involves speaking truth to our brother—even if it is hard truth. It may involve rebuke or correction. It may involve your friend “wounding” your pride in order to heal your soul (Proverbs 27:6).

How do we encourage one another, balancing both tenderness and truth, compassion and conviction? We do it by stirring up faith in one another, helping one another to apply the power of the cross. We do it by preaching the gospel to one another, as John Owen said:

Set faith at work on Christ for the killing of your sin. His blood is the great sovereign remedy for sin-sick souls. Live in this, and you will die a conqueror; yea, you will, through the good providence of God, live to see your lust dead at your feet...Let faith look on Christ in the gospel as he is set forth dying and crucified for us. Look on him under the weight of our sins, praying, bleeding, dying; bring him in that condition into your heart by faith; apply his blood so shed to your corruptions. Do this daily. (*Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*)

This is what we help one another to do.

We must stir up each other and encourage each other all the more as we see the Day of Christ approaching. The author of Hebrews assumes here that we will be attentive to the approach of that great Day, that we will “see” its approach, that we will anticipate it. This means living with an eternal perspective. It means seeing the world with new eyes. It means seeing each war, each earthquake, each tsunami, each moral failure, and each sign of death and decay as a “birth pain” of the coming age, a sign of creation groaning for renewal (Romans 8:18-25). With that eternal perspective, we help one another to fight sin, knowing our full redemption is drawing near.

### 3. The Grace of Restoration

For some, breaking free of from pornography is an uphill climb that has yielded more frustration and defeat than victory. For some, they've tried accountability and confession. They've tried more disciplined prayer and Bible reading. They've tried "surrendering" what little control they feel they have to God. They tried cold showers, twelve steps, and casting out the demons of lust. Nothing seems to work.

God calls those trapped in sin to experience the ministry of restoration: "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness" (Galatians 6:1).

First, look at the expression "*caught in transgression*." This means to be caught, trapped, overtaken, overcome. For many in the grip of porn, this is exactly how they feel: sucked into a pattern of sin and completely out of control.

Paul commends others to "restore" those trapped in sin. The word in Greek is *katartizo*, and it means to mend what has been broken, to arrange or put in order, or in an ethical sense, it means to make someone *what they ought to be*. It is also a medical word for setting a broken bone. Paul is asking some in the church to take on the ministry of restoration, to mend broken hearts. There are some in the church who are uniquely equipped to be *psychologists* in the truest sense of the word: "psyche logos," the study of souls. To some God has given the ability to be soul physicians, to take our fractured internal lives that have yielded so much sin, and set them in right order again.

Who are these soul physicians? Paul calls them the "spiritual." In the context of this letter to the Galatians, the spiritual are those who are keeping in step with the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:25), those who are putting sin to death in their own lives and who have lasting fruit of Christlike character (5:22-23), those who are clothed with humility and are eagerly waiting for the Day of Christ (5:5). They are the mature spiritual leaders who effectively model intimacy with God and show it by the way they live.

I experienced this in a powerful way when I was trapped in the thick of porn addiction. There was a besetting misery in me each time I tried to crawl from the pit sin. I knew I could not excuse my behavior like a helpless victim, but I felt helpless nonetheless. I became familiar with the burn of fresh tears in my eyes. No telling how many loving hands had touched my shaking, inconsolable shoulder, how many times I came forward at church meetings spilling my guts to total strangers. After a while, I began to lose faith in the altar calls. Just how real was my gut-wrenching repentance if there was no fruit?

Then, one not so special day, a man at my church asked me to go to lunch with him. I knew of him as a gifted speaker and teacher, but not much more. At lunch he said he perceived some restlessness in my heart and wanted to offer any wisdom that might be relevant. A few days later I found myself sitting across him divulging the depths of my sinful story, fighting back tears. This was the first of many conversations.

During one of our long discussions, he offered to pray for me in regard to my addiction. I asked him, rather cynically, what the difference would be between his prayer and every other prayer offered on my behalf. Why should I have any hope that God would change me now? Without hesitation he looked at me and said, "*The difference is I am not going to leave you.*"

And he didn't leave me. We spoke often on the phone. We met week-in and week-out to talk and pray, dive into the depths of my heart, find the roots of my sin, strip away my pretenses, and let the Word of God speak to those fractured areas of my soul.

I didn't know it at the time, but I was experiencing the ministry of restoration that Galatians 6:1 speaks about.

Proverbs 20:5 says, “The purpose in a man’s heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out.” In the thick of my addiction, the first half of this proverb made perfect sense to me: my heart was like a deep ocean. Things were lurking in my heart that I could not see, predict, or understand. I knew my behavior stemmed from deeply-rooted motivations in my heart, but those motives seemed to be buried in murky waters of confusion.

My friend at church was “a man of understanding.” God brought him into my life to draw out of my heart the things I was unable or too afraid to see. Even in my cynicism, he told me he would believe the promises of God for me until I had the faith to grasp them myself. He was a man of understanding who could probe beneath the surface to see what made me tick. With skillful questions he dropped a bucket deep into the dark waters of my heart and helped me see the idols I was harboring.

For some they will find a man of understanding among the elders or pastors of their church. For others, they will need to look elsewhere—a biblical counselor or other godly individual. These spiritual fathers and mothers are one means of grace that are often neglected.

### **In the Shadow of the Cross**

The church is not merely a byproduct of the cross. It is a part of God’s design. The cross humbles all in its shadow, making the spiritually-minded church the safest place on earth to confess our ugliest sins. The cross inspires a great compassion in us, a desire to mimic Jesus in his ability to rub shoulders with the lowliest of sinners. The cross calls us to take sin seriously as we see it in one another. The cross also ushers us into a real family, a family with spiritual fathers and mothers who are equipped by God to disciple us and impart something to us we simply cannot learn in books.

Do we believe it? In light of all the cross reveals, do we believe that such a thing is true? This really is the important question, isn’t it?

The Benedictine monk Sebastian Moore says that the cross is meant to wake us up to the seriousness of our sin. We are relentlessly self-absorbed, we gloss over sin, and we rationalize it. At times we only pretend we are sinners so we can pretend to be forgiven. Whenever we doubt the ugliness of our sin or the immensity of God’s love for us, we need only to meditate on the cross. And when our faith buckles under the gravity of the cross, when all the evil in our scruffy hearts tries to hold its own against God, He answers with “the thunder of resurrection.”

The only reason we can look with faith on the cross is because the cross is not the end of the story. The empty tomb tells us death did not have the final say. The witnesses to the resurrection assure us Christ is alive. The Spirit sent from heaven proves that Christ is now seated at God’s right hand.

The cross makes us all into practical theologians. Facing the cross, we are moved to probe deeper into the mystery of Christ’s wounds. Our mind awakens. But the cross is not just a mental exercise in theology. “Theology” did not bleed and die for us. Christ did. And it is this fact that warms our affections and hurls us toward the heart of God.

## Making a Covenant with Your Eyes

Where do we start? Even if we are eager to embrace a robust theology of the cross and want to yield to the Holy Spirit to change us, where do we go from here?

### 1. Make a covenant with your eyes.

Like Job before us, we make a firm agreement with our eyes to not look on a woman with lust (Job 31:1). This means bouncing our eyes away from lustful images and bouncing our thoughts away from lustful memories and fantasies.

### 2. Make a covenant with your mind.

The proper motivations for a sustained covenant with our eyes stem from a right understanding and vision of God as He is revealed in the Bible, especially the cross of Christ. This means we must make a commitment to enrich our minds in the truth of God's word, daily meditating on the cross and its benefits. We must do whatever it takes to have disciplined and passionate pursuit of God in the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, meditation, and soaking in the word of God.

### 3. Make a covenant with your brother.

We cannot fight this fight alone. We must use the means God has given us for transformation. This means we must find a brother or group of brothers who share a similar vision for holiness. Take time to meet regularly with these brothers for counsel and accountability. Use these articles as a springboard for good discussion and prayer.

### 4. Use helpful technology.

Unlike a generation ago, Internet pornography is easily accessible to nearly every person in your church: husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, teens, kids, and even church leaders.

Adults and kids alike need helpful blockades in place to prevent exposure to inappropriate content. Church members also need tools that help them have honest conversations about the temptations they face and the choices they make online. Covenant Eyes gives you both.

**Covenant Eyes Accountability** monitors all websites visited and rates each one for mature content. This information is provided in easy-to-read reports that are sent to a trusted friend or group of friends, removing the secrecy of how the Internet is used. Knowing you are accountable to someone for how you use the Web helps change your surfing habits. Put simply, you think before you click. The reports are custom-made for good accountability conversations.

**Covenant Eyes Filtering** blocks mature content, based on age-based sensitivity settings that parents can select for each member of their household. Moms and dads can create specific lists of websites that should be blocked or allowed for each of their kids and themselves. We also empower parents to choose the times of day and the amount of time per day that each person in their home may access the Web.

Sign up for Covenant Eyes by going to [CovenantEyes.com](http://CovenantEyes.com). Use the promo code *pinkcross* and get your first 30 days for free.

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