

Pornography Addiction and Idolatry: Throwing Down the High Places.
By Mark Dobbs

Pornography addiction has become an epidemic problem in our culture, and the church has not been immune to it. In the U.S. the pornography industry is estimated to earn over 14 billion dollars a year, and world wide the estimates approach 60 billion dollars a year.¹ No one knows for sure what the pornography usage rates are for Christians, but if trends mirror the general population, as church demographics generally do, casual consumption of pornography may be as high as 50%, and regular use, may be as high as 30% of all church attendees. We have a big problem.

In my psychology counseling practice, pornography use is now the number one reason men seek counseling. Many first seek help when they are caught by their spouses, or when they get into trouble for pornography use at work. Most have tried repeatedly to rid themselves of the pornography habit, with little success. The church, as a whole, has given very little real practical help in overcoming or resisting the problem, perhaps in part because pastors are every bit as vulnerable to pornography use as the rest of us and they dread hypocrisy. The church has universally acknowledged that pornography use is wrong and sinful but has relied mostly on strength of will and accountability for overcoming the problem.

But pornography addiction and use is rarely a matter of weak will. It is fundamentally a spiritual problem with spiritual causes and spiritual solutions. It is also a *complex* problem involving every aspect of our created being: Our body, soul (psychology), and spirit.² So simple solutions are not likely to work; until and unless the spiritual roots of the problem are understood and addressed, successful, ongoing resistance to pornography is unlikely.

Defining the Problem

Let's start with a few assumptions. Behind every sin is a legitimate, God-designed need. One way sin occurs is when we try to meet legitimate needs in illegitimate ways. For example, people are created with a need for social intimacy ("It is not good for man to be alone.") and God provides the legitimate answer for that need ("I will make a helper suitable for him."). If we try to meet that need in a way God did *not* intend ("I will look at pictures of naked men or women."), we sin, *and* we lay down the foundation for an addiction. If, instead of turning to one's mate for social intimacy, we fire up a computer and download pornography we are attempting to meet an honest need in a dishonest way. Behind every sin is an honest need, and God has already met that need in a way that is holy and beneficial. Trying to stop a sinful behavior without identifying and meeting the

¹ <http://www.blazinggrace.org/pornstatistics.htm>

² Pornography addiction often requires complex problem solving and solutions to over-come. This article focuses primarily on the *spiritual* aspect and solution of pornography addiction: worship. The second article will focus on the psychological (soul) and body (biological) aspects of pornography addiction, and provide some relief in those domains.

underlying need will not bring success. Will power alone will not stop pornography use because buried beneath all of the torrid images is an honest need.³

Addiction is a term we should seek to define carefully. Not every sinful act is necessarily addiction, even if it is repeated. I recently read this definition of an addiction: “a pathological relationship to any mood-altering experience that has life-damaging consequences.”⁴ Webster defines addiction as “compulsive need for and use of a habit-forming substance.” I define an addiction as *anything we attach ourselves to, to meet an emotional, physical, or spiritual need, when the thing we attach to is not intended to meet that need*. In my definition *anything* can become the object of an addiction. I’ve known people addicted to work, alcohol, drugs, sex, and gambling, but also to *church attendance and even Bible reading*.

Many addictive objects have legitimate uses (alcohol for example). But when a person uses the thing in a way it’s not intended to be used they run the risk of forming an addictive attachment. The thing is, the addictive object *often works for a little while* or gives the illusion of meeting the need. But sooner or later, the need makes itself felt again because it hasn’t really been satisfied. The person is driven to seek satisfaction again. Most common addictive objects elicit quick and powerful emotional responses or reduce a felt need state very quickly, and so a strong attachment is formed, sometimes immediately. That is certainly the case with pornography, as it often provides an adrenaline rush, or when accompanied with masturbation, a pleasurable excitement/relaxation cycle. Pornography use provides instant gratification. By contrast, most of the ways God meets our needs emphasize long-term blessing over short-term gratification. God always has an eternal perspective on our wellbeing, while we are *very shortsighted*.

When men come to my office asking for help with pornography I often ask them, “What kind of sin do you think pornography is?” Most will report that it is the sin of lust. They make reference to Jesus’ statement, “Everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart.”⁵ On the face of it, that makes a lot of sense, and if pornography use is the sin of lust, the common church teaching of “looking away” makes a lot of sense. If you don’t look, you don’t lust, and don’t then commit spiritual adultery. But in most cases, pornography addiction is not *merely* about lust. Pornography addiction, which usually begins before marriage, usually continues well after marriage, even when a man has the God blessed provision of marital sex. Jesus is teaching several things in this “looking to lust” statement, but one of the most important is that He is teaching that righteousness is an inward state not just an outward behavior, as the Jews had been taught by their religious leaders. Jesus is not giving a recipe for stopping pornography addiction. He is telling us to attend to our inner world.

Several years ago I had the mixed blessing and chore of an hour-long commute. I asked for and received the Bible on tape for Christmas, and used the commute time for Bible study. The thing that is so wonderful about studying scripture this way is that you get huge chunks of scripture in a short period of time. The words wash over you and

³ For a beautiful illustration of this principle, read Jesus parable about unclean spirits, Matthew 12:43-45. Not only does this exactly describe addiction but it *also hints* at the demonic presence often at work in addiction.

⁴ *Torn Asunder* by Dave Carder, pg 54

⁵ Matthew 5:28

invade your thoughts, and you can “read” the entire Bible in a relatively short period of time. Usually we read the Bible in small snippets, and we can really miss the big picture that way.

As I was listening through 1 and 2 Kings, the phrase “He did right in the sight of the Lord . . . only the high places were not taken away” appeared over and over. I began to get curious about those high places, and learned that they were literally the tops of hills all over Israel where shrines and monuments were set up to foreign deities. In Exodus, God was very clear that if Israel did not purge Canaan of their culture *and* their gods, they would be a snare.⁶ Further research showed that the idols representing the demon deities of Canaan were pornographic in nature. They were naked, had big penises and breasts, were depicted in sexual acts, and were often used to symbolize fertility. The kinds of worship that took place with these idols often involved drugs or alcohol, and also could involve illicit sex. These high places were the “dirty book stores” of the ancient world.

In Exodus 20, right at the beginning of the Ten Commandants, comes this warning,

3 “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me.

4 “You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth.

5 “You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me,

6 but showing loving-kindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.” (NAS)

I began to connect the dots. Pornography use and addiction is the sin of idolatry. It involves making or using “graven images” and worshiping those images and giving them power and place in your life. The high places are no longer the tops of hills, but they are “virtual”: the computer screen, the DVD player, the television set. They are also the places where pornography is peddled: the “adult”⁷ book store, even convenience stores and gas stations. We have, in our culture, protected the high places even as they did in ancient times. When Gideon was called by God to lead the nation of Israel, he *started* his work by cutting down the Asherah pole in his father’s front yard, in the center of his village. He was almost murdered for it because his neighbors were so attached to the pole. Such is *our* American affection for our high places. Pornographic idolatry violates our God created and commanded need to worship God. We replace the object and function of our worship with something of our own making that will never satisfy. Worshiping pornography will never resolve the need we have inside us to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and His Son Jesus.

The Second Commandment comes with a curse. God warns that the sin of worshiping idols gets passed down from one generation to the next; to three or four generations even. This intergenerational pattern is quite well known in addictions

⁶ Exodus 23:33, Judges 2:1-3

⁷ Why is it that the things in our culture labeled adult are almost always destructive and childish, requiring the user to abandon reason and morality in their use?

literature (particularly with alcoholism), so much so that people have come to believe that genetics are the *cause* of addictions. What is really happening is that each succeeding generation falls prey to the curse. They do not receive the covering *blessing* of Father God because they have been taught to worship other things. Those patterns of relationship, the patterns of attachment and avoidance, get impressed, cookie cutter style from one generation to the next. And history teaches us that succeeding generations deteriorate, go further into more perverted forms, and get worse than their fathers.

Fortunately, the Curse also comes with a Blessing. God says He will show His loving-kindness to the thousands who *love Him and keep His commandments*. The curse can be broken. We can return to the proper object and function of our worship, Father God, be forgiven,⁸ and be freed from the obsessive and self-destructive cycle of giving ourselves to something that at best has no value and at worst is the very presence of demonic evil. The key to stopping pornography addiction is *worship* and the key to continued abstinence from pornography addiction is *continued worship* and removing the high places. Here is where the flaw in our thinking and theology has led to continuing the trap of pornography use. We have not taught our congregations the protective and fulfilling need for worshipping God. *And* we have not taught our men, in particular, *how* to worship.

Worship is not so much an act of our *will* but of our *spirit*. When we teach the men in our congregations to “try harder” against pornography and suggest accountability partners, we are dooming them to failure. Until and unless we teach them how and whom to *worship*, they will go right back to using pornography because the real need has not been met or identified. They will also pass on to their sons and daughters the relational tendency to use pornography (or some other addiction), just as they most likely inherited that tendency from their own fathers. We also need to help them with the *why* of worship, how to see God in the everyday of our lives. People will celebrate when given a good reason.

Jesus’ instructions to the Samaritan woman at the well are very helpful here. She was taught that worship was to take place at a specified time and a specified place. To the Samaritan, no longer welcome in Jerusalem, that place of worship was on Mount Gerazim. To the Jew it was in Jerusalem. Most Christians, even when taught differently, have a hard time locating the place of their worship in their own spirit, but tend to associate worship with the 20 minutes or so of song singing on Sunday morning. Perhaps this is also why they (and we) fail to recognize pornography use as a form of worship. Worship in the Jewish tradition was *routine* and an *act of the will*, a cognitive exercise. But Jesus said, “Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall you worship the Father. You worship that which you do not know; we worship that which we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”⁹

⁸ II Chronicles chapter 33

⁹ John 4:21-24 (NAS)

Removing the High Places

So worship is key to stopping pornography use, and pornography use is an ancient problem. Another ancient problem surrounding pornography use is the difficulty and the inability to remove the high places associated to idolatrous worship. In the same way, Christians have difficulty in truly ridding themselves of the many expressions of pornography in their homes and communities. We are surrounded by pornographic or near pornographic material on all fronts, and pornographic imagery has invaded otherwise innocuous and enjoyable activities such as sporting events, popular magazines, and network and cable television. Even a casual trip to the mall will test the eyes and heart of a believer with graphic advertising and store front displays of sensual underwear.¹⁰ At this stage in our culture's life-cycle it is probably impossible to remove all such high places. We are a democracy and our culture has decided it wants to keep its high places, and in fact has protected its high places by law. We are like the Jews living among the pagan cultures of Canaan, and God warned us that pagan culture would become a snare. Those bits and pieces of everyday pornography trigger behavioral response cycles that are very difficult to stop.

But what about our personal high places: Our TVs, our video libraries, our magazine subscriptions, our internet access? There is a reason high places have historically been difficult to remove and destroy; *they are protected*. I once counseled a client that had an extensive collection of pornographic DVDs and movies. This person had several thousands of dollars tied up in the collection. Most of the DVDs were never even opened, but the person felt compelled to order new ones every so often. I counseled that they would need to be destroyed as a part of breaking the addiction. At first the client thought of reselling the DVDs to recoup the money, but the flaw in this thinking became clear to the client the moment it was said: That's not removing the high place, that's giving it to someone else. My client needed to understand that the money *was already wasted and lost*. There was no value left in those DVDs. I cautioned my client that when the time came to destroy the DVDs he or she would feel incredible resistance to do it. Excuses, distractions, and rationales of all kinds would present themselves to the client as to why *now* was not a good time to start destroying the collection. My client came back the following week and confirmed that it was very difficult to start the destruction of the collection.

This really isn't so different from what was done with ancient high places and idols. It is really hard to destroy them. Some would say, "But it's a work of art." Others would want to hedge their bets, not certain if Yahweh or Baal would pay out better. People are attached to their high places with a false sense of comfort. So the high places would remain. Curiously, one of the kings of Israel that was the most successful, not only in "doing right in the eyes of the Lord" but also in "removing the high places," was Josiah,

¹⁰ Do not confuse the enjoyment of sexual activity with your mate with the idolatrous worship of graven images. They are separate things. A favorite tactic of those who want to keep their high places permanently displayed in public is to accuse those who want restrictions of pornography of being prudes or of sexual repression. Wanting to keep your sex life private with your mate is not sexual repression; it is civility. It is not prudishness; it is modesty. Public displays of sexuality forced on others is *not* liberation it is rudeness and a lack of charity towards others. C.S. Lewis has a wonderful discussion of this very idea in *Mere Christianity*.

who became king at the age of eight. The innocence of age and the fact that he was raised by the Levites helped to make him one of the most successful kings at removing idolatry *and the high places* from Judah.¹¹

Worship is the Key

Worship, is the giving of *worth* to something or someone. The worth that you and I have to give is *very* valuable in the spiritual realm. Treating our worship casually is like leaving a roll of hundred dollar bills sitting on the hood of your car at the Wal-Mart parking lot. People are bound to come along, recognize the value, and take it for themselves, even though they know it is not intended for them. When we worship something without value (a carved stone, or picture on a computer), someone in the spiritual realm will recognize the value and will take the worship we are wasting. Demonic gods will take up “residence” around our false objects of worship. The demonic realm craves worship and most of their activity is centered on getting us to part with our worth-giving so they can have it. Once they discover a steady supply, they will protect it.

When a person begins to worship at the altar of pornography that altar stops being passive and begins to take on a real spiritual presence. The pornography (or the demon behind it) will “call out” to the person every so often to get them to worship again. It will use every selfish and carnal trick in the book to justify the worship: “your wife is mad at you,” “your boss yelled at you,” “you’ve been working hard and need something for yourself,” “you’re not hurting anyone,” “no one will know,” “you’re bored,” “your wife is pregnant and you need the release” and on and on. This is another reason act-of-will methods of stopping pornography use fail. It doesn’t take into account the active, spiritual, demonic presence behind the high places of pornography. Satan has a will at least as strong as our own.

Understanding that demonic influence is at work behind pornography is sobering. This truth explains why idol worship ranks high on the list of the Ten Commandments (number two in fact). It helps explode the idea that pornography use is a private sin and doesn’t hurt anyone else. When a father, mother, or church leader begins to consume pornography they unwittingly invite the presence of the demonic into their homes and churches. Men and women who would never attend a séance, read a horoscope, or consult a spirit guide nevertheless will privately use pornography, and in the process invite, unwittingly, demonic influence into their lives. Once that demonic presence has a foothold those persons find their spiritual strength sapped. They jeopardize God’s covering of blessing on the family or church they lead. They become indifferent to their *real* relationships, and their mates suffer. They find it harder to do spiritually rewarding things like attending church, reading the Word, or even having a satisfying conversation with their mates. Life takes on a depressing pall that fuels the need for more spiritual nourishment. But instead of turning to the Source the entrapped person returns to the empty calories of pornography. With each spin of the cycle they become more enslaved and more malnourished. Of course we’re not even talking here about the psychological

¹¹ II Chronicles 34:1

distortions to expectations, body image problems, or hypnotic states that come with pornography addiction.

So how *do* we remove those high places? I recommend that it be done quickly and thoroughly, with prayer, and with a partner, and that it be done with *worship*. Remember, if we fail to remove the high places they will call out to us, and make the task of removal harder. We need to reclaim our homes, our computers, our video cabinets and purge them of *anything* that would lead us to an association to pornography. This will mean different things to different people. To some it may mean canceling their subscription to Sports Illustrated so that they won't receive the swimsuit issue (to others this may not *be* a high place). Likewise, women may need to give up a subscription to *Cosmopolitan*.¹² It may mean canceling subscriptions to paid cable service, or canceling cable altogether. It may mean doing a thorough cleaning of a computer hard drive so that all cached images and viewing history is gone. It may mean installing a reliable content blocker on the computer, or better yet, accountability software.¹³ To others it may mean eliminating internet access or the computer from the home altogether. When done prayerfully, the Holy Spirit will guide in remembering the secret places where pornography or *near* pornography is hiding. He will let us know where we are harboring high places. He will also more than compensate us for the perceived loss of what we are removing. I also recommend that people ritualistically pray through every room of their house, dedicating it to the Lord, much as the temple was cleansed and rededicated in ancient times.

Once the high places are removed, we *must* develop the discipline of daily worship. I teach my clients, on the fingers of one hand, the five essential disciplines of the Christian life: Prayer, Bible Study, Worship, Fellowship, and Service.¹⁴ In American Christianity, we often leave out worship from this list and emphasize Bible reading and church attendance (not necessarily the same as fellowship), and give little real instruction about how to pray. Most people are concrete in their thinking, so they assume that reading your Bible, going to church, and praying are what we have to do so God will love us. That, of course, is all wrong. God already loves us more than we can possibly imagine. The purpose of the Christian disciplines is that they deliver to us spiritual food, water, and air. We can't really survive or thrive without them. We should exercise the Christian disciplines, not because God will be more proud of us, not to earn favor, but *to set our minds on the things of the Spirit*. If we set our minds on the things of the Spirit

¹² A curious difference between male and female sexuality is that men are aroused by images of women, and women are *also* aroused by images of women, though perhaps not sexually aroused. That is why in women's magazines the ads and cover photos are filled with images of women with cleavage and skin. The man imagines being *with* the woman in the picture, the woman imagines *being* the woman in the picture. There is increasing sexual content in women's magazines because sex sells to women just as it does to men. I recently glanced at the women's magazine rack at the grocery store as I was checking out and *every single one* advertised an article about sex on the cover.

¹³ People tell me that Covenant Eyes is the best accountability software. It does not restrict access but sends an email at regular intervals to a person's accountability partner, giving that partner a detailed list of all the websites visited. Most content blocking software is easily defeated and is little deterrence to a determined addict.

¹⁴ There are certainly more specific disciplines than these, but these five are super-sets of the others. Fasting, in my way of thinking, is a subset of prayer; evangelism, a subset of service or fellowship; giving, a subset of service; and so on. My favorite book on the disciplines: *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster.

(in our example, worshipping God) we will not carry out the desires of the flesh (indulge in pornography viewing).¹⁵

To backtrack a little, worshipping God is a crucial, essential part of ending pornography use and addiction and to prevent relapse. But now we run into another problem: men, in general, do not find it easy or natural to worship God. Men are not generally good communicators of their feelings. This, of course, is true not only of men addicted to pornography, but of men in general. Church choirs have more difficulty recruiting men than women. Women are more likely to buy Christian music and praise albums. Women are more likely than men to raise their hands in a worship service. It is rare to hear a man in public conversation *say* that he loves God. He is more likely to tell you what he believes, or what's right, or to debate doctrine. But ask him to simply say, "I really love Jesus," and he'll turn shy on you. This is true not only for Christian men, but also for Christian *leaders*. When I ask the pastors that come for counseling what the Lord is doing in their lives, they become quiet. When I ask clients "How is your walk with the Lord?" they almost always answer in terms of church attendance and activity. We're not socialized in American church culture to say, "Oh, I really love Jesus." Ask about a favorite food or football team, however, and people won't hesitate to use the "L" word. The center of worship is expressing intimate, personal love for God, and we're not good at it.

What's needed here is to help men express their adoration and love of God in ways that are already familiar to them. We need to apply behaviors we already do, to *spiritual* endeavors. Everyone worships (we're hard-wired to do it); we just don't always recognize our behaviors *as* worship. Men are quite comfortable in giving high fives, in giving loud whoops at a ball game, at cheering and screaming at the TV when Manning connects with Harrison (okay, I'm a Colts fan). These forms of celebration can be leveraged to help men say, "I love you" to God. If we can yell and scream and make fools of ourselves at a ball game, we *can abandon* ourselves to holy worship, either publicly or in the privacy of our cars, homes, and showers (a great place to sing). We can "high five" our Lord. We can cheer Him for His accomplishments on the cross. We can tell Him, "You simply blow me away with your creation!" Involving men in worship has been one of the more impactful accomplishments of the Promise Keepers!

Just as we are cursed in our modern era with an abundance of pornography, so also are we blessed with an abundance of Christian literature and music, unparalleled in human history. It is a simple matter to plug in a worship CD in the car or in the home and worship along with it as you drive or mow the lawn. Even though the internet has been built on the back of pornography, it has also become the home of instantly accessible Bible instruction, preaching,¹⁶ music, computerized Bibles, and even free downloadable audio Bibles in MP3 format.¹⁷ We have no excuse for being without resources to worship. I encourage my clients to make it a habit or *discipline* to sing worship songs or read worship poetry (the Psalms) *daily*. We must get it out of our systems that worship is what takes place on Sunday morning when we sing.

¹⁵ Romans 5:8

¹⁶ Check out <http://www.oneplace.com>

¹⁷ www.Bible.com

A curious thing often happens in the life of a believer when he or she begins actively to worship God and pursue a heart-felt relationship with Him. The urge to use pornography fades away. It is no longer an act of the will to resist it; it simply isn't a temptation any longer. It ceases to be of interest, and without any huge struggle of will power or empty bargains with God. Even if a temptation is presented, it is quickly dismissed. If it crosses the worshiping believer's mind to dial up a porn site, she usually dismisses it quickly as something distasteful and unpleasant, much like a person who has learned to appreciate good and healthful food, finds that *fast food* is no longer appealing. The need is met, and the real thing, worship of the eternal God and His Son Jesus, blows away the competition.