

Freedom from Porn

By Dave Bowerman

Four years ago, God delivered me from a 36-year stronghold of pornography. He freed me through the truth of living under His rule. He brought me into His reality, which re-prioritized everything in my mind. Should I step outside of it, I am capable of falling back into what once harmed me. However, I am now a changed person. For decades I looked at porn and now I don't.

Porn in society, and even in the church, is a problem spiraling further out of control. Many people are desperate to overcome it but don't know how. Even those of us who want to help are not always effective in that process. To gain a better understanding of this exploding problem, let's look at the stages in which a man becomes attracted to porn, our typical responses as counselors, and what I believe is the best remedial approach of all. As we move through the stages and treatment options, we should keep in mind that they may overlap. Furthermore, though this is written in a language for men, it applies just as much to women.

Stages of Attraction to Porn

THE FIRST STAGE—CURIOSITY

Here a man looks into what porn is and what it feels like to look at it. It isn't wrong for him to **want** to look. He is wired to be attracted to the sight of the opposite sex. However, looking can lead to lust, which almost always leads to something more.

THE SECOND STAGE—INTEREST

Here a man explores porn with intention. He knows that what he is doing is not wise. However, for him the risks do not outweigh the rewards. Looking is pleasurable and, besides, he appears to function fine in his life. He may have some guilt, but he rationalizes it away by telling himself that he's not having an actual affair. Nobody else has to know. He believes he can stop if he really wants to. Therefore, he is not aware that he is moving to a point where return is very difficult.

THE THIRD STAGE—DEFICIT ATTRACTION

Here a man looks at porn because he feels powerless or inadequate. Perhaps his parents shamed him as a child. Maybe he felt painful rejection growing up with kids who shunned him. Whatever has led to his feelings, he has found comfort in porn. The women in the pictures do accept him. They also empower him so that, in his imagination, he can do with them what he wants. Of course, he's not in touch with reality. As things progress, his internal deficits aren't his only issue. He is acquiring a full appetite for porn, and it is taking on a life of its own.

THE FOURTH STAGE—PURE ATTRACTION

Here a man looks at porn because he craves it. For him, it's wonderful – the female form, a woman exposing herself knowing that others are getting pleasure from her. Men at this stage have rewarded their behavior with nature's most powerful high countless times. As a result, their appetite has grown much stronger.

THE FIFTH STAGE—INTENSIFIED ATTRACTION

Here a man has grown so used to porn that he is almost in a trance when he views it. Although he is drawn to the experience, he is also easily bored with it and constantly looks for new ways to feel excited. He wastes a lot of time, energy, and resources pushing the limits. As a result, he crosses boundaries as his appetites morph into other forms of impurity. He may even slide into criminal behavior such as prostitution, exhibitionism, child pornography, molestation, or worse.

Our Typical Responses to Men at the Five Stages

We tell the man who has CURIOSITY ABOUT PORN to “just say no.” He needs to reel in his curiosity lest it take him down the wrong road. After all, he has the will power to go the other way.

We exhort the man who NURTURES AN INTEREST IN PORN to draw boundaries. He needs to take actions such as using filtering software for browsing the Internet. He needs to be careful where his eyes and his thoughts go when he sees an appealing woman. He needs to firmly decide that sex will come only from his wife. He needs to find a friend who will hold him accountable. Similar to the man in the first stage, we are challenging him to do more to help himself.

We point the man who has a DEFICIT ATTRACTION TO PORN to get counseling. After all, he’s having a hard time helping himself. Psychotherapy will try to reveal the material causes of his problem by exposing past hurt and look into the effects that others have had on his life. It will also explore the role that tragedies may have played. It will examine where his sense of failure came from. All of this is to help him replace his attitudes toward the pain with better points of view. However, all these self understandings may not help that much as too often he will find that the women in the pictures are still alluring.

We encourage the man who has a PURE ATTRACTION TO PORN to get involved in recovery. The twelve steps are widely accepted in society and even the church. They have helped countless addicts to function once again. However, recovery instills the point of view that they will always be addicts and, therefore, need to attend meetings for the rest of their lives. Even the Christian version supports this.

I do not judge someone’s story of freedom. If they say that God rescued them in a particular way that is fine. However, it is not the God *we choose* who frees us, but the God *who is*. Step three of the twelve steps talks about surrendering oneself to God. I like that, but it doesn’t seem to go far enough. For example, the truth of Romans 6 talks about being baptized with Christ in His death “so that the body of sin might be done away with.” If those in recovery were exposed to that, it would change things, even delivering the addict from his struggle.

Finally, we direct the man with an INTENSIVE ATTRACTION TO PORN into behavioral treatment. Since nothing else has worked, perhaps he can learn behaviors that keep his urges under control. These include techniques that most of us have never heard of, such as antecedent mapping, covert sensitization, ammonia aversion, and satiation therapies.

Behaviorism tries to improve the *material effects* on a man. It identifies “triggers” that produce wrong feelings such as racy billboards, TV commercials, women who dress seductively. Then, with techniques like those above, hopefully a man can develop better responses to the

problematic triggers. One problem is that these techniques do not necessarily fix the problem or cure the man. They offer a strategy that often must be repeated regularly in order for progress to be maintained. Too often people just tire of the exercises because “they just don’t feel like it.”

Most people, even Christians, look at some of these “modern approaches” as analogous to “deep surgery” and the truth of the Gospel only as “surface treatment.” However, when we grasp how the power of the gospel works, we see that it is really the other way around.

We Need to Rethink Our Approach

I don’t feel great about the ways that society responds to porn. Therapeutic approaches alone, i.e. absent God’s help, do not have a high success rate at helping men at most of the five stages remain free. Neither do they enable a man to become all God calls him to be. They may help him to stop a bad habit. However, God has much more in mind.

We believers should care not only about stopping, but also about doing so in the way that reflects the power and purpose of God. Sadly, we settle for shortcuts. Our attitude is, “I’m not supposed to look at porn, so I’m going to have to figure out how to stop. It doesn’t matter how I stop. If counseling, recovery, or behavioral techniques do the trick, fine. If a pill is available, even better.” Where is God in this process? While we may get help, real freedom involves allowing God to transform us.

The gospel is what freed me from porn. It was so profound that it caused me to embrace a powerful premise – the truth of the gospel is needed in order to become free from strongholds.

Therapeutic approaches are not what truly free people in the first place. Even if we undertake them in the name of God, they often begin with their own assumptions about God, the nature of impurity, and what the goal of treatment should be. Those may not agree with Scripture.

I know of no modern approach that *requires* that one start with the God of Scripture. Or challenges us to view our problem through a moral lens. Or tells us that the goal of treatment should be holy living. We can add these assumptions to them, and we often do. However, the power of God’s truth can get diluted in the mix. In fact, the truth of the gospel works for each of the five stages of attraction and completes what God wants to do in a man.

The Truth Is What Sets Us Free

Jesus said “If you follow my teaching you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32). If the truth is what frees us, lies are what get us in trouble in the first place. In my book, *Higher Pursuits*, I talk about seven lies that cause a man to allow strongholds such as pornography to develop. Until they are exposed, he’s trapped.

Three of the lies lead the way in taking him down. “Moral relativism” leads a man to define his own truth. “Materialism” causes him to look at reality through the lens of what is here and now. “Presumptuousness” entices him to misuse God’s grace as a license to keep sinning. These lies make him weak and allow his appetites to rule him. As long as he falls for them, he stands no chance of freedom.

So, it is important to spot lies and replace them with God's truths. In other words, becoming free doesn't come down to just not looking at porn. Rather, it comes down to the person being grounded in what's real rather than what's not.

When Jesus says, "you will know the truth," He is talking about seeing things as they are under the rule of God. A man who knows the truth knows that God is supreme. He knows that this world is superficial, right down to the women in the pictures. He also knows his terrifying tendency to use God rather than to be used by Him. The rule of God shows him the lies and does not permit him to nurture impure thoughts. He can have the impure thoughts if he wants, or he can have the rule of God, but he can't have both.

When the truth frees a man from impurity, he realizes that he's been delivered. He knows that he didn't free himself. Rather he let go of his attempts to change, to gain what only God could do for him. Now he sees life from a higher place and is wise to what once caused him to stumble. However, he doesn't obsess about the material causes and effects of his earlier problems because he is immersed in a truth that has raised his sights. He is alive to God! It's uncharted territory, but elevated terrain that enables him to see all.

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