

But What About, Part 4: Pornography and Its Effects

December 1, 2019

So far in this class we have considered God's design for our bodies, gender and sexuality within the context of the overarching Christian story. We are beautiful (created by God), and at the same time broken (corrupted by sin). Through Christ we are called to redemption, and both Christ-centered marriage and consecrated Christian singleness bear witness to this redemption. Finally, we live in the hope of glory (the final redemption of our bodies). In light of the Christian story, we can address the complicated, confusing, and dark realities that we face in this broken world. We've already considered homosexuality and transgender identity; today we will address pornography.

This was not an easy lesson to prepare, but it is important for the church to address as we seek to lay out a biblical view of gender and sexuality. The church must address the sins of homosexual practice and of rejecting one's God-given maleness or femaleness, because these sins are increasingly celebrated in today's society, even though they are rejections of God's good and beautiful design for our bodies. But if the church fails to address the far more prevalent sin of pornography, the world may conclude (with some warrant) that we are self-righteous and hypocritically selective in our application of biblical teachings. Even more important, the church of Christ will have failed to care for its many members who are engaged in, tempted by, exploited by, or otherwise harmed by this sin.

In this lesson we will seek to follow the apostle Paul's admonition in Ephesians 5:11-12: "Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret." We are to "expose" (that is, to clearly point out and frankly warn against) the pervasiveness of pornography and its harmful effects. At the same time, we will seek to avoid giving unnecessary details that would stir up ungodly curiosity or shame.

1. The Definition of Pornography

Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart famously stated in 1964: "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description ["hard-core pornography"], and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But *I know it when I see it.*" The context of his statement was a Supreme Court ruling on the constitutionality of laws prohibiting obscenity.

Legal scholars have found it difficult to settle on a precise definition of pornography, in part because lawmakers have disagreed about what should be protected as free speech and what should be prohibited because it is harmful to the public. But a helpful definition from a Christian standpoint is the following: "Pornography consists in removing real or simulated sexual acts from the intimacy of the partners, in order to display them deliberately to third parties."¹ This definition is helpful because it reminds us of God's design for sexual intimacy: that it be shared and delighted in by husband and wife, within the safety and exclusivity of the marriage covenant. The imagery of Song of Songs confirms this: the spouses' bodies are represented as a "locked garden" (4:12), a walled city (8:9), "my own vineyard" not to be shared with others (8:12).

By removing sexual acts from their proper context and putting them on display before the world, pornography inherently violates God's good design for marriage and sexuality: "It offends against chastity because it perverts the conjugal act, the intimate giving of spouses to each other. It does grave injury to

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2354.

the dignity of its participants (actors, vendors, the public) since each one becomes an object of base pleasure and illicit profit for others. It immerses all who are involved in the illusion of a fantasy world.”²

Masturbation, which is normally coupled with pornography, also promotes an inherently self-centered approach to sexual gratification. Masturbation does not train or prepare anyone to exercise sexual self-control, to prioritize love for one’s spouse even above one’s own desires, or to honor God’s design that sexual intimacy be cultivated and enjoyed within a relationship that is mutual and covenantal (that is, a husband and wife whose bodies, lives, and resources belong to each other) rather than in isolation. For these and other reasons, masturbation is also outside the bounds of what God desires for his children.

The New Testament warns consistently, clearly, and strongly against stirring up lust and engaging in impurity, and these warnings apply to both pornography use and masturbation:

- In Jesus’ teaching: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman *with lustful intent* has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matthew 5:27-28)
- In Paul’s teaching: “But sexual immorality and *all impurity* or covetousness must not even be named among you...Let there be no *filthiness* nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving” (Ephesians 5:3-4).
- Paul frequently lists “impurity” and “sensuality” along with “sexual immorality” (e.g. Romans 1:24; 2 Corinthians 12:21; Galatians 5:19; Colossians 3:5; 1 Thessalonians 4:7). While sexual immorality primarily refers to sexual acts, impurity and sensuality refer to a wider range of thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors, and would include producing, promoting, or viewing pornography.

2. The History and Pervasiveness of Pornography

The English word pornography is derived from the Greek words *porneia* (sexual immorality) and *graphe* (written or depicted). Pornography is not an exclusively modern phenomenon. Sexually explicit paintings, sculptures, and writings were produced in ancient Mesopotamia, Peru, China, Greece, Rome, Egypt, and elsewhere. In ancient Rome, around the time the New Testament was written, these were prominently displayed in pagan temples, on the streets (often as advertisements indicating where prostitutes could be found), in the public baths (as a form of entertainment), and in homes (as a decoration or good-luck charm).³ Ours is not the first society where sexually explicit material seems to be almost everywhere.

The Internet, however, has made pornography more easily, widely, and privately accessible than ever before. Today, approximately 30% of data transferred on the Internet is pornography. Porn sites get more visits each month than Amazon, Netflix, and Twitter combined.⁴ 1 in 5 mobile searches are for pornography, and consumers spend \$260 million each day on online pornography.⁵ In February 2006, approximately 58 million Americans visited porn sites each month. In 2016, the number had almost doubled, to 107 million (out of approximately 285 million Americans age 10 and above).⁶ Women are increasingly consumers of pornography as well, and erotic romance novels and video chats are especially popular among women. Approximately 80% of the over 125 million consumers of *Fifty Shades of Grey* were women.⁷ According to Covenant Eyes, 64% of Christian men and 15% of Christian women admit to

² Ibid.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_erotic_depictions

⁴ <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/what-you-should-know-about-women-and-pornography>

⁵ <https://www.covenanteyes.com/pornstats/>

⁶ <http://time.com/4277510/porn-and-the-threat-to-virility/>

⁷ <http://www.bowker.com/news/2012/Whos-Really-Reading-50-Shades.html>

watching pornography at least once a month (statistics vary, but the percentages tend to be higher among younger people).⁸

The apostle Paul wrote in Romans 1:22-25: “Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.” The increasing pervasiveness of pornography and other sexual sins in our society is a sobering sign of God’s wrath against our society (that is, God giving us over to our own corrupt inclinations and to their destructive consequences, because we have worshiped ourselves and other created things).

3. The Effects of Pornography

The effects of pornography are numerous, and they are increasingly recognized even by people outside the church. In his article “A Pornographic Style of Relating”, Christian counselor Andrew Bauman describes six destructive relational attitudes that pornography commonly fosters especially in habitual users.⁹ Each of these qualities is confirmed by scientific studies (many of these findings are helpfully summarized on fightthenewdrug.org, a “research-based” and “non-religiously affiliated” organization).

- **Control:** pornography is “a non-mutual relationship alone with imagery...there is no one else to satisfy, no one else to consider, and you get to control the entire scene. This creates an innate selfishness and an unconscious desire for absolute control over intimate relationship.”
 - A 2015 study in the *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy* found that “the hours spent viewing Internet pornography were positively correlated to participants’ narcissism level. In addition, those who have ever used Internet pornography endorsed higher levels of all 3 measures of narcissism than did those who have never used Internet pornography.”¹⁰
- **Objectification:** “The addict, over the years, is looking at thousands upon thousands of images...the unknown bodies have no names or stories and have become means to an end...After they no longer serve a purpose, they are cheaply discarded...This causes [people] to chronically jump from relationship to relationship (just like clicking from pornographic image to pornographic image), looking for perfection and completion in a person.”
 - “In a survey of 1,500 young adult men, 56% said their tastes in porn had become ‘increasingly extreme or deviant’. Many porn consumers eventually find themselves getting aroused by things that used to disgust them or things that they might have previously considered to be inappropriate or unethical.”¹¹
- **Speed:** “The rapid pace of relationships comes to resemble the quick climax of intensity around pornography: the rush and thrill of not getting exposed, an urgency for consummation, and ultimately an abrupt and inevitable ending (normally with shame attached). The speed of relationship normally involves high emotional and sexual linking without the proper time to grow them deeply, and other areas of relationship such as intellectual and spiritual connections are neglected or completely forgotten.”
 - “People who have consumed a significant amount of porn are more likely to start having sex sooner and with more partners, to engage in riskier kinds of sex that put them at

⁸ <https://www.covenanteyes.com/pornstats/>

⁹ <https://andrewjbauman.com/a-pornographic-style-of-relating/>

¹⁰ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/figure/10.1080/0092623X.2014.931313?scroll=top&needAccess=true>

¹¹ <https://fightthenewdrug.org/how-porn-affects-sexual-tastes/>

greater risk of getting sexually transmitted infections, and to have actually contracted a sexually transmitted infection.”¹²

- **Hunger:** “There is a frantic need that must be filled by the other. This cavernous need consumes and devours both partners in an attempt to mend something broken inside. This category shows itself in co-dependent relationships, where both parties become enmeshed. The hunger drives them to consume—rather than delight in—the other.”
 - “In a content analysis of best-selling and most-rented porn films, researchers found that 88% of analyzed scenes contained physical aggression: generally spanking, gagging, choking or slapping. Verbal aggression occurred in 49% of analyzed scenes.”¹³ A 2015 meta-analysis of 22 studies from 7 different countries concluded that pornography use was associated with verbal and physical “sexual aggression in the United States and internationally, among males and females, and in cross-sectional and longitudinal studies.”¹⁴
- **Isolation:** “We learn our sexuality behind closed doors, and in the dim light of the computer screen our sexuality remains hidden, even from ourselves. We come to protect this isolation as some type of sacred space, and even the thought of inviting another human in feels threatening and disruptive. The isolation fuels the secret life and separates us from the loving relationships that we most need.”
 - “In many cases, porn consumers find their tastes so changed that they can no longer respond sexually to their actual partners, though they can still respond to porn.”¹⁵
- **Fantasy:** “Fantasy is an escape from what is real. Whether it be difficult emotions, such as stress, anxiety, or depression, or just the pain that genuine relationship inevitably brings, fantasy relieves those struggles for a moment. While healthy relationships live in the truth, pornography helps bolster a life of fantasy that is difficult to undo. Fantasy brings relief but does not bring restoration.”
 - “Porn stimulates the same areas of the brain as addictive drugs, making the brain release the same chemicals. And just like drugs, porn triggers pathways in the brain that cause craving, leading users back for more and more extreme ‘hits’ to get highs.”¹⁶

These are only some of the social and relational effects of pornography use. There are many other effects: pornography use has contributed to numerous marital crises and is a factor in the majority of divorces; the pornography industry worldwide exploits children, women, and men, subjecting them to violence, harassment, degradation, and sexually transmitted infections.

4. Mercy, Healing, and Hope through Christ

For those who are tempted by, engaged in, or addicted to, pornography

- Get help from brothers or sisters in Christ! Do not try to fight this battle on your own.
- Put filtering or accountability software on your computer and smartphone (e.g. Covenant Eyes, Fortify)
- Get accountability from people who will both encourage and challenge you
 - Beware of the limitations of getting accountability only from people who struggle and fall just like you do. An accountability group of people who are all regularly failing in this area will not tend to foster an expectation of growth. The best kind of accountability embodies

¹² <https://fightthenewdrug.org/how-porn-warps-ideas-about-sex/#c7>

¹³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/04/08/is-porn-immoral-that-doesnt-matter-its-a-public-health-crisis/?noredirect=on>

¹⁴ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jcom.12201>

¹⁵ <https://fightthenewdrug.org/how-porn-affects-sexual-tastes/>

¹⁶ <https://fightthenewdrug.org/how-porn-affects-the-brain-like-a-drug/>

the steadfast love of God the Father, the unwavering call to holiness in Christ, and the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

- Because this sin is so pervasive, it should not be seen as an off-limits topic among Christians in general. We should ask each other about sexual integrity in general and pornography in particular, in the context of normal Christian friendships, mentoring relationships, and prayer partnerships. (And this should not be the only challenging topic we ask each other about, either. We might also consider ways to spur one another on toward generosity with our money and resources, since the New Testament warnings against sexual immorality are often side by side with warnings against greed.)
- There are sex addiction recovery groups as well as Christian support groups (e.g. Pure Desire) in the local area, as well as specialized Christian counseling resources (e.g. Harvest USA in Pennsylvania, Heart to Heart Counseling in Colorado). Contact the pastors for more info about which resources might be most helpful and appropriate for you.
- Make it your primary goal to pursue Christ, rather than making your primary goal to resist porn. (The first goal includes the second, but not vice versa.) Christ is infinitely more satisfying than porn, and his grace is sufficient for each day and for every trial we face.
- Be truthful with your spouse or girlfriend/boyfriend about your sin and/or struggle in this area. Though it may be painful and terrifying to willingly bring this into the light now, it will only be more painful and damaging if you wait until later or if it comes to light unintentionally. (Also, marriage does not automatically fix a single person's pornography habit. There are many seasons of marriage that call for sexual self-control, and sexual satisfaction within marriage only happens in the context of intentionally, comprehensively, and self-sacrificially loving another person, which is exactly the opposite of what pornography and masturbation train you to do.)
- Examine the underlying motives and broader life patterns that drive you toward pornography, rather than focusing only on behavior modification
 - This is often a longer process, because we don't always know why we do what we do, and we can easily deceive ourselves about our own motives
 - One way to begin this process would be to consider the six qualities in Bauman's article and to intentionally work on cultivating the corresponding virtues (which Bauman identifies as freedom, honor, patience, desire, communion and authenticity) in your friendships and/or in dating or marriage relationships
 - Another approach would be to consider what drives you to porn. Common triggers include: boredom, loneliness, stress, anger, tiredness, rejection, depression, feeling overworked and underappreciated.¹⁷ Which of these emotions do you most often feel? What beliefs about God do they presuppose (e.g. "I'm angry because God owes me a spouse and he hasn't given me one yet")? The Lord "satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's" (Psalm 103:5). What good ways has the Lord provided for your legitimate desires to be satisfied, or for your unfulfilled desires to be laid at his feet?
 - These are good conversation topics to pursue with an elder, mentor, or wise friend who knows you well
- Pray for real people who are directly harmed in the production of pornography (children whose bodies are exploited, women who are often pressured into violent and degrading acts or who have come to believe that such acts are normal and healthy, producers and advertisers whose livelihoods are enmeshed in wickedness). Learn about the connection of the pornography industry to global sex trafficking. Consider how you can help people who are seeking to recover from the damage that has been inflicted on them.
- Read Tim Chester's book *Closing the Window* for further help

For those who have been hurt by your spouse's pornography use

¹⁷ These are listed in Chester, *Closing the Window*, 37.

- You have been deeply hurt and wronged, and you may feel betrayed, deceived, or even traumatized. You may experience emotional, physical, and/or psychological effects.
- Anger at your spouse is natural, often warranted, and may persist for quite some time. A wise mentor or trustworthy counselor can help you process strong emotions, pursue a path of wisdom, and resist temptations to either trivialize the problem or to harbor a bitter and vengeful spirit.
- Christ can heal your wounds. He knows the feeling of betrayal. But healing often takes time (in many cases years rather than months or days).
- God wants to heal your marriage. However, your spouse may or may not want to seek help. The encouragement and trusting hope of a spouse can be a great source of strength for one who is struggling to be pure. If your spouse is in denial or rejects help, the church is here for you. There are also support groups and counselors for spouses of addicted persons, such as the Heart to Heart Counseling Center in Colorado (www.drdougweiss.com).
- The pastors and elders recognize that these situations are often complex, and a general statement of this kind cannot address every specific circumstance. We are always available for counsel and prayer.

For parents of children and youth

- “If you don't teach your kids about porn, the porn producers will teach your kids about porn for you” (Alexander Rhodes)
- According to a study published in 2017 by the American Psychological Association, the average age of boys’ first exposure to pornography was 13. (Other studies have concluded that the average age of children’s first exposure to pornography is as low as 11.)¹⁸ 60% of the young men in the APA study said that their first exposure was accidental (43%) or forced (17%); only 33% said that they were intentionally seeking it out.¹⁹
- See the earlier lesson in this series “Christian Witness to the LGBT Community” for a more extended discussion of how to discuss gender and sexuality in age appropriate ways with children. See also the resources listed below.

Resources

Be careful if you go online and search for resources about pornography. Pornography companies are shrewd in their attempts to strategically place ads and to draw people into their orbit.

The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention (erlc.com) has several helpful articles about pornography on their website. Russell Moore and Andrew Walker have also published a book entitled *The Gospel and Pornography*.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops published a statement, “Create in Me a Clean Heart: A Pastoral Response to Pornography”. While there is some advice within this statement that encourages specifically Roman Catholic practices, on the whole this is a very wise, thoughtful, comprehensive, well-researched, compassionate, and Christ-centered statement. (I am not aware of a similarly comprehensive statement from Protestant church leaders.)

Fight the New Drug (www.fightthenewdrug.org) provides science research-based information about the negative effects of pornography.

¹⁸ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/04/08/is-porn-immoral-that-doesnt-matter-its-a-public-health-crisis/?noredirect=on>

¹⁹ <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2017/08/pornography-exposure>

Tim Chester's *Closing the Window* is a gospel-centered book "for people who use porn and want to be free of it". It is primarily addressed to men.

For women struggling with pornography, there is a helpful chapter by Courtney Reissig in *The Gospel and Pornography* (which also recommends the book *Purity is Possible* by Helen Thorne).

Stephen Arterburn and Jason Martinkus' *Worthy of Her Trust* is a helpful book for spouses recovering from betrayal that provides a framework for pursuing integrity and rebuilding trust. Martinkus "relates how he repaired his own marriage after revelations of sexual addiction." The book also includes contributions from his wife Shelley, and can be helpful to both spouses.

William Struthers, *Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Impacts the Male Brain*, has some valuable scientific insights about the impact of pornography on men's brain chemistry, as well as theological insights about what redeemed male sexuality looks like.

For parents, *Good Pictures Bad Pictures* (and *Good Pictures Bad Pictures Jr.* for ages 3-6) are resources that you can read, or that you can read with your children, to introduce the topic at an age appropriate level. See also protectyoungminds.org, a website by the author of these books. For older children who are using a tablet/phone/computer, consider an online media agreement that outlines expectations and principles (examples available at commonsensemedia.org and elsewhere).