
Pornography, Masturbation, and Other Private Misuses: A Perversion of Intimacy

by Jeffrey S. Black

A lawyer once referred to me a counselee who had been involved in a series of sex crimes. He had been caught, arrested, and indicted by the time I met him. A believer in his late fifties, he was a widower with several children who lived out of state. At the time the sex crimes were committed, his wife had been dead for about ten years.

The marriage had been very troubled; there had been fights and he'd been thrown out of the house. His wife had been hospitalized on a number of occasions. She was said to have been clinically depressed. During those times the couple had had no sexual involvement, and the man revealed to me that he had engaged in several extramarital affairs when his wife had been hospitalized and unavailable sexually. He seemed to think that made them less objectionable.

This man also told me that he had had several exploratory homosexual relationships, prior to his marriage, in his late teens and early twenties. During his marriage and after his wife died, he had had a very close relationship with his daughter, so intense that I thought perhaps there had been some incestuous things going on, but he said no. It was clear, however, that his daughter had functioned in other ways as a surrogate spouse for him. When she was in her thirties, she decided to move away. Approximately a year after that, he began sexual involvements with two adolescent males.

This case illustrates two aspects of sexual sin that counselors ought to bear in mind: Immorality is a form of "cheating" and expresses a pattern of "drifting."

Sexual Immorality as "Cheating"

What do we mean by describing sexual immorality as "cheating"? Typically we think of cheating in terms of having an affair with someone who is not your spouse.

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My meaning here is a little different. Ephesians 5:31-32 reads:

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife. The two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery, but I am talking about Christ and the Church. However, each of you also must love his wife as he loves himself; and the wife must respect her husband.

Scripture is very clear that marriage is meant to "typify" the believer's relationship with Christ. Because God is both the creator of the marriage relationship and the revealer of the truths concerning redemption and our relationship with Christ, the meaning of the metaphor is authoritative. God Himself *creates* the similarity rather than articulating a similarity that already exists. The principal subjects of the metaphor—the nature of the marriage bond and the believer's union with Christ—interact in ways that change or enrich our understanding of both. My experience of Christ in me helps me to understand what kind of a spouse I am to be. Conversely, my experience of marital oneness helps me to grasp something of the mystery of spiritual union (Galatians 2:20). As a result of my experience of union with Christ (Ephesians 4:1,20-21;5:1), I am compelled to speak truthfully (Ephesians 4:25), to build up (Ephesians 4:29), to die to self (Ephesians 5:1), and to not be ruled by self, passion, or anger (Ephesians 4:31) in relationships, especially in marriage.

Where does sex fit into the picture? I believe it is intended to be at the end of the intimacy chain. Paul indicates that sex is the product or expression (1 Corinthians 7:3-4) of union. Sex never creates union. Not surprisingly, the world tells us the exact opposite. Sexuality as it is portrayed in the media leads to or produces intimacy or is divorced from the "problem" of intimacy altogether. In fact, it is often implied, the best sex is anonymous sex.

If marriage is intended to depict the sexual relationship as an expression of intense companionship and intimacy, then any sexual expression, even in the context of marriage, that does not express such a union falls short of God's design. Scripture says that two become one, and God says that sexuality in marriage is supposed to be an expression of that companionship, an expression and consequence of that intimacy. If that is the case, then there are scores of husbands and wives within the church who are functional atheists.

What usually characterizes a marriage in which

there are sexual problems? The wife complains, "My husband comes home, I haven't had any kind of involvement with him, no communication. He says, 'Honey...' I look at him and say, 'Who are you? Leave me alone!' But he wants to make it better by going to bed. He thinks that it will make me feel close to him." Though no flagrant immorality is involved here, there is "cheating"—sex without intimacy.

I called the behavior of my sex-offender counselee "cheating" because his whole sexual life—his marriage, his extramarital affairs, and even the deviant sexual behavior he exhibited—was an expression of his desire to experience sex without intimacy. He was lazy. He didn't want to strive for intimacy in his relationships. He didn't want to strive for it in his relationship with his wife; hence, the adultery. He next found his intimacy in a convenient relationship with his daughter, which God says was no place for him to have it. I believe that is one of the reasons his daughter moved away. This man was a cheater. God had laid out a plan, and he had circumvented that plan to do things his own way.

As I counseled him, I asked about the possibility of getting remarried. He said, "Well, I just don't want another marriage to turn out like my first one." That's understandable, but what was he really saying? He was saying, "I don't want to work at intimacy. I want the consequence of sexuality, but I don't want to achieve it in the way God designs it." After his daughter left, this man attached himself to two kids who lived nearby. They began to serve this cheating purpose in his life.

Any time you see a person engage in illicit sexual behavior, you can be sure that person is a cheater. He wants sexual gratification without intimacy. That means that when you're counseling someone who has a problem with pornography, a sexual problem in the marriage relationship, or even an involvement in some bizarre and perverted form of sexuality, at root he does not want to experience sexuality in the context for which God designed it. This person must be confronted with God's program, and that program is intimacy.

Cheating and Self-Centeredness

When you counsel people who have problems with pornography, one thing to understand is that pornography has a very simple goal: masturbation. When someone produces a pornographic movie or magazine (in an industry obviously targeted towards men), the goal of that pornography is masturbation. Beyond that, the goal of the pornography and the masturbation is to create a substitute for intimacy.

Masturbation is sex with yourself. If I'm having sex with myself, I don't have to invest myself in another person. People who are "addicted" to pornography

aren't so much addicted to lurid material as they're addicted to self-centeredness. They're committed to serving themselves, to doing whatever they can to find a convenient way not to die to self, which is the nature of companionship in a relationship.

The self-centeredness shows up in many different ways. When you talk to persons who are pedophiles (child molesters), one of the most interesting things you will notice is their tendency to look at children as adult sexual partners. They don't think, "I'm having sex with

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a child"; they tend to see the child as their sexual, physical, emotional equal. To do otherwise would be to decenter, to see things through a lens other than their own desires and experience. That is dying to self, that is intimacy, that is companionship, that's loving somebody else—which is precisely what they are unwilling to do.

Scripture offers the very best model for understanding this kind of sexual sin. The psychological literature offers countless explanations for these behaviors that are all designed to leave you preoccupied with your history, your experience, and your mother. But you will not have to face yourself and your own choices.

In contrast, Scripture always focuses on the heart. Because God plans sexuality to be an expression of oneness, any form of sexual perversion is also a perversion of God's plan of intimacy. Whether you counsel a person whose sexual behavior makes you physically ill or someone with "garden variety" sexual problems in marriage, the problems always go back to intimacy and the root of God's intention for sexuality. Genesis 2:18 ("It is not good for the man to be alone") means that your most basic counseling intervention is to teach this person to die to self and to love others more than himself or herself.

An interesting sidebar in this particular case study reveals the divergence between biblical theological explanations and common secular notions about sexual perversion. While I counseled this man, I received a phone call from his attorney. He wanted his client to spend time in a sexual addicts rehabilitation center, believing that this would be viewed favorably by the

judge at sentencing. I reluctantly agreed since I did not believe that this person continued to be a threat. He seemed well grounded at that point, and I didn't want to see him go to jail. I believed he had repented, and he was going on to do some good work in counseling. So I agreed.

What a mistake! My counselee is not in jail; but in order to get a favorable sentence, he had to label himself as a sexual addict and agree to withdraw from relationships until he was cured. The irony, of course, is that he was being challenged by me to pursue legitimate intimacy in the context of a marriage relationship for the first time in his life. But because of the sex addict label, the court's goal was to keep him *out* of any meaningful relationship—the very root of the problem.

Sexual Immorality as “Drifting”

The second aspect of sexual immorality is “drift,” which is what I call a history of the heart. Let me give you an illustration.

When I was seventeen, I decided to buy my first pornographic magazine. This was a fearsome thing to me. I remember going to the local drugstore that had a little magazine section. I waited and watched to make sure nobody was looking. I picked up the magazine and rolled it up so that no one could see what it was. Then I stood around and wandered back and forth until I screwed up the courage to pay for it. Just as I walked towards the counter, the man behind the counter left and a woman took his place. I quickly turned around. I must have spent forty-five minutes in that store trying to buy that magazine—but I did manage to buy it. As time passed, I bought a few more.

Then I noticed something. I wasn't rolling up the magazine anymore. I just picked it up, walked to the counter, and bought it! As a matter of fact, I started buying two. I still bought them only when the man was there. But after a while, I didn't care who was behind the counter. Eventually I was even able to chat with the woman when I paid for the magazines.

People start out in what I call a “baseline comfort zone” in the way they deal with their own sin. God says that the nature of sin is such that as we continue to sin and quench the Spirit, as we continue to sear our consciences, what was originally a very uncomfortable thing to do becomes comfortable. We begin to drift as we compromise. Sexual sin often starts as a terrible, anxiety-provoking experience. But because of our lust, our desire, our heart set against God, after a while this reaction fades. We are in a new comfort zone. And after awhile, if we do not repent, we drift even further.

Whenever I counsel someone with a sexual problem, particularly something viewed as deviant or bizarre, I

expect to find a predisposing pattern or history that precedes the presenting problem. No one gets up in the morning and says, “I don't have anything to do today. I think I'll go expose myself!” Persons never leap into extreme forms of sin; they “drift” into them. When you counsel someone with a deviant sexual pattern, assume that he or she has a lengthy history of immorality that is unlikely to be disclosed without persistent probing by you. Typically, when you ask such persons what they did, they will tell you. But when you ask, “What else did you do? What led up to that?”, they will answer, “I didn't do anything else.” Persist in your pursuit. Invariably as you spend time with such persons, you begin to see a history of compromise that makes the last thing not a leap but a baby step. In terms of sexual sin, the person had already drifted far away from God's standards.

Sinful “drift” is like going to the beach and falling asleep on a raft in the ocean. Suddenly your sleep is disturbed by the lifeguard's whistle. As you awake to the persistent, annoying shrill of the whistle, you ask yourself, “Who is that idiot whistling at?” You look up, and it's you! You hadn't planned it, but suddenly everybody on the beach looks like a little dot because you've drifted way out to sea. That's the way sin works. Sin always has a history. But remember that God also has a history with our hearts.

God's Solution to “Drifting”

That history is called sanctification. Sanctification is both positionally complete and dynamically progressive. Psalm 119:9-11 reads, “How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your Word. I seek you with all my heart. Do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.” In John 17:14-19 Jesus prays to the Father, “I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you would take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.”

The person who drifts lives in a heart world of compromise and immorality. He is continually thinking his own thoughts, scheming his schemes. But the believer is called to sanctify himself by meditating on the Word of God. This is God's solution to the sexual sins that trouble and torment many.

The Bible doesn't have anything specific to say about masturbation because it doesn't need to. The problem with masturbation is not masturbation but the condi-

tion of a person's heart. Masturbation is merely one expression of that condition. Scripture is not inadequate, as some would say, because it fails to articulate a behavioral mechanism for dealing with it. God says that if my heart is kept pure by continually meditating on the Word in the context of God's sanctifying work, I will have the power to overcome the temptations that lead to indulgence, pornography, and masturbation.

Most people come for counseling because they are problem-centered. They ask for a technique to keep them from engaging in a certain behavior. They are hoping for a crash course that would enable them to utilize God to overcome a particular sin. Their desire for

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a quick solution may be understandable, but there is no technique, no mechanism—psychological, spiritual, or otherwise—that will prevent them from indulging in pornography or masturbation.

God's sanctifying Word has not been steadily at work in these counselees, so in a crisis they discover that they're not equipped to deal with sin. They hope to quickly find a solution that bypasses that ongoing work of the Word through the Spirit. In essence they say, "Quick! I need a little bit of God! I'm really in trouble here."

As a counselor, you can't give people something that God slowly perfects day by day. All you are going to be able to offer them is biblical information. What they really need is wisdom, but wisdom is what comes when God applies His Word to their lives. In the midst of a crisis, all the counselor can do is encourage the beginning of that process.

"Set Apart" for God or the World

As we deal with the problem of sexual sin, it is important to acknowledge another factor at work. What the Bible calls "the world" is a system of values and beliefs that are aggressively seeking control of our hearts. The world also has (if I can use this expression) a "sanctifying" influence in that the world seeks to set us apart for *itself* in contrast to God's desire to set us apart

for Himself. A person who comes for counseling over sexual sins is a person who has been "set apart" by the world, who has allowed himself to continually indulge in the things presented to him by the world.

We must return to the biblical fact that sexuality is a spiritual act; it's not primarily physical. It always involves the spirit of man, either in concert with the will of God, communing with the Holy Spirit, or in rebellion against that will, trying to push the Holy Spirit out of the way. The world wants to ignore that dimension and present sexuality as a biological act characterized by the build-up and necessary release of sexual tension. When the pressure is building, the world implies that we are powerless to resist. Even Christian men think that way, misquoting 1 Corinthians 7:1-8 to bolster their argument that marriage is a provision for passion: "Paul says it's better to marry than to burn."

But as many married men have discovered, the flesh is insatiable. It does not operate on the principle of tension reduction. The heart of man is insatiably pursuing evil. As Jeremiah 17:9 summarizes, "The heart is deceitfully wicked and beyond cure." It is that problem that sexual sin reveals and that God's Word addresses.

In that sense, everywhere I look in Scripture I see the issue of *porneia* addressed, the issues of masturbation, pornography, sexual perversion, child molestation, pedophilia, and all the other things people get into. The Bible does have a lot to say about them, but not from a technique standpoint; the issue is not psychological techniques. The issue is that God intended sexuality to be an expression of communion and intimacy. It's a metaphor for our relationship with Christ. We seem to find all manner of ways to circumvent that reality.

Sexuality is a spiritual act, not a biological one. It's not a problem of dealing with our drives but of sanctifying our hearts. When you counsel people, keep that in the forefront of their minds. Often, when people come for counseling they are terribly disappointed because they want a solution that doesn't require them to subject their wills to the Holy Spirit. Simply put, their approach to the problem *is* the problem. When you work with them, you're successful when you're able to help them recognize that the only solution is what the Psalmist says—that if I hide God's Word in my heart, I will not sin against Him.