

### **Introductory items**

So the advances of our digital age have brought many blessings to our lives. I sure don't want to go back to having to write everything by hand, or to low definition TVs with only a few channels and lots of commercials, or back to those painfully slow dial-up modems.

But if we're paying attention, we know that our digital age also brings challenges for us and our homes. So that's why our *Building Faith at Home* sermon series this year is on *Next Steps in the Digital Age*. God's Word shows us that home is an important place for spiritual growth, nurture, and mission. And we want all our homes, living with others or alone, married or unmarried, kids or no kids, to be loving, Jesus-centered homes.

And in this digital age, that requires tackling the topic of online pornography. It's a hard topic, one that can bring up all sorts of uncomfortable feelings, both for you and for the speaker. But it's one we need to talk about in a digital age, because of its prevalence and its potential to bring huge damage to ourselves and our homes. So let's ask for God's help as we begin...

*For those who don't identify as Jesus followers* – So if you don't yet identify as a Jesus follower, welcome, you've picked an interesting week to come. If you're wondering, we don't cover sexual sin every week.

And as we discuss pornography, my focus is on the sexual lives of Jesus-followers. As Paul, an important early church leader, said in the Bible book of 1 Corinthians, "What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church?"

And also, if Christians have been unloving towards you about the topic of sex, I'd like to apologize on behalf of the church. As we explore the teachings of Jesus, it is clear that while His followers won't agree with everyone's sexual choices, we are called to love everyone and to seek a good community for all our neighbors, no exceptions. And Jesus practiced what He preached, sacrificing His life for us all.

So as you explore the Christian faith, I hope you'll focus first on the Person of Jesus and the loving relationship He offers, rather than focusing first on if you resonate with Christianity's teachings on sex. For Jesus is at the center of Christianity, and it's best to start in the center.

*Distinguishing between shame and godly sorrow* – As we talk about pornography, with all the experiences and struggles represented in this room, I want to start, as one of your pastors, by saying that Jesus does not want His followers to experience shame or condemnation; no matter how you've sinned sexually, or been sinned against sexually.

So this morning if you feel like God could never love someone who's sinned sexually like you have, or that you're just dirty, or that you've got to really beat yourself up to try to earn your way back into God's favor, that stuff is not from God.

It could be from evil spiritual forces, who try to deceive us into thinking that sin is no big deal when we're tempted. And then try to deceive us further by switching their story after we sin, saying it makes us shameful people. Maybe some of us have come in here this morning with shame around our sexual sin, I've been there before in my past.

Thankfully, life in Christ is never about carrying the heavy burden of our sin. Romans chapter 8 speaks good news to us, "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." None. 1 Peter chapter 2 says, "He's called you out of darkness and into His marvelous light."

The glorious news of the gospel is that Jesus came and lived a perfect life, in your place, on your behalf, and then on the cross He took the punishment and shame for all your sexual and other sins. Jesus took it all away, and in its place He offers you His forgiveness, love, and righteousness. You receive it by grace, through faith in Jesus, trusting that He died for your sins and rose from the dead.

Then adopted into God's family, a beloved son or daughter, based on what Jesus has done for you, not on what you've done. So there is no room for shame or condemnation, even when you're in a pattern of sin, that's not what God wants for His children.

Our heavenly Father, like any good father, is grieved by His children's sin, which is destructive to us and to others. So His Spirit convicts us of our sin. But the purpose of God's conviction and of any restorative discipline that He brings is not shame. Rather God, in His kindness, helps us to have a godly sorrow over our sin that helps us to confess our sins, repent of them, and seek help. That's God's heart for His children, to help us walk together in His life-giving ways.

So as we talk about pornography, let's keep in mind God's heart for us, and thus reject any feelings of shame, while responding to any convicting work the Spirit brings.

*Proverbs 4 helps us think through porn's impact* – As we think about porn's impact on our hearts and homes, like last Sunday, we're starting in Proverbs chapter 4.

So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to the Old Testament book of Proverbs. If not, no worries, we'll have the verses on the screen. And if you're new to reading the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers.

As you're opening to Proverbs 4, I'll share some background. The majority of Proverbs was written or compiled by King Solomon of ancient Israel. Proverbs helps us to understand how life generally works and to invite us to live with wisdom. And Proverbs starts by noting that the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. So biblical wisdom is not just applying principles to life, it is living skillfully in relationship with God, following His ways. Proverbs chapter 4 will help us see that pornography's deforming power gets in the way of that.

### **Teaching:**

*Guard your heart by guarding your speech, sight, conduct (23-27)* – Proverbs chapter 4, starting in verse 23. **(23-27)**

<sup>23</sup>Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.

<sup>24</sup>Keep your mouth free of perversity; keep corrupt talk far from your lips.

<sup>25</sup>Let your eyes look straight ahead; fix your gaze directly before you.

<sup>26</sup>Give careful thought to the paths for your feet and be steadfast in all your ways.

<sup>27</sup>Do not turn to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil.

These verses are part of a broader section of Solomon's instruction to his sons in chapter 4. And of everything in that section, Solomon emphasizes verse 23 the most, saying, "*Above all else, guard your heart.*"

When we speak metaphorically about our heart, we're talking about our feelings. But this word for *heart*, in the Hebrew that Proverbs was written in, is sometimes used more broadly. This word *heart* sometimes describes not only our feelings, but also our thinking and values and will, our whole internal world.<sup>1</sup> I think this is how *heart* is being used in verse 23, to describe our whole internal world: thoughts, feelings, values, and will. So when you hear *heart* this morning, think your whole internal world.

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Theological Workbook of the Old Testament*.

And verse 23 says it's really important for us to guard our hearts, like say a guard protects a castle, protecting the good within, and keeping the bad out.

Then the end of verse 23 explains why it's so important to guard your heart: it's because everything you do flows from your heart. Your heart is the wellspring of your life, and if you don't guard it, allowing it instead to be polluted, that pollution will flow down through your life.

So it's important to pay attention to what forms our heart and the hearts of others in our home. Verses 24-27 share some key influences. Verse 24 says to pay attention to what we say, verse 25 says to pay attention to where we look, and verses 26-27 say to pay attention to what we do. Our speech, verse 24, our sight, verse 25, and our actions, verses 26-27, influence our hearts for good or for bad, towards God or away from God. And our heart then influences the direction of our entire lives.

That's what we're talking about this morning, our formation as people. About who we are becoming, in light of what we look at and what we do, whether it's forming or deforming us.

*Some ways porn deforms our (and others') hearts* – When it comes to porn, some say it's no big deal, it's just indulging a bodily impulse and doesn't harm anyone. But this morning we'll see that porn actually deforms our heart and other people's hearts. And research shows that a growing number of women are watching porn, so this isn't just a struggle for men.<sup>2</sup>

It's unpleasant to think about, but it's important to consider porn's deforming power both for ourselves, and to be equipped to share about this deformation with our kids when they're ready. So let's begin with a question. As people watch porn that depicts sex in unrealistic ways, how does that shape expectations of their sexual experiences?

The book *Premarital Sex in America*, written by two sociologists, completed an in-depth study of single men and women ages 18 to 23. They found that people who use pornography can experience crushingly unrealistic expectations regarding their or their partner's physical appearance. And also that people who use pornography can experience crushingly unrealistic expectations about their sexual performance. The lies of porn negatively impacting the sex lives of people we love, who view themselves, their partners, and sex itself in distorted ways.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://endsexualexploitation.org/wp-content/uploads/NCOSE\\_Pornography-PublicHealth\\_ResearchSummary\\_8-2\\_17\\_FINAL-with-logo.pdf](https://endsexualexploitation.org/wp-content/uploads/NCOSE_Pornography-PublicHealth_ResearchSummary_8-2_17_FINAL-with-logo.pdf) Accessed online 1/30/20.

A few years ago, a noteworthy Christian musician got caught up in sexual sin that eventually led to cheating on his wife in a months-long affair. His wife was heartbroken, and they weren't able to repair things, and she ended up divorcing him. Reflecting a year later, that musician said some hard, true words, "What you think you want, what you think you can have is not real, and you'll lose real things pursuing it."<sup>3</sup>

It's why God's Word, in verse 25, admonishes us to look straight ahead, focused on the good, to fix our gaze directly there. It's because it's easy for our eyes to drift towards that which deforms our hearts. What we choose to look at impacts the kind of people we're becoming, either forming us into more loving, wise people, or deforming us into less loving, more foolish people who lose real things if we pursue a lie.

And further, as much porn depicts physical aggression toward women,<sup>4</sup> how does that shape hearts? That book I mentioned, *Premarital Sex in America*, found that one result is that young women today are increasingly being pressured to behave sexually in ways that mirror porn.<sup>5</sup>

And the National Center on Sexual Exploitation, a non-partisan, non-profit, has a 33-page research summary on pornography and public health based on recent, peer-reviewed, research literature. They conclude, "Taken in totality, the converging evidence overwhelming suggests that pornography is correlated with a broad array of harms that adversely impact the public health of the nation. These include higher incidence of sexually transmitted infections, increased verbal and physical sexual aggression, acceptance of rape myths, risky sexual behaviors among adolescents, reduced impulse control and reckless decision making, increased sexual dysfunction, and more."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gospelherald.com/articles/61141/20160104/ccm-artist-derek-webb-opens-up-about-affair-divorce-from-sandra-mccracken-i-betrayed-the-trust-of-my-wife.htm> Accessed online 1/30/20.

<sup>4</sup> Orenstein, P. (2016). "How Porn is Changing a Generation of Girls," *TIME*, April 11, p.47. An article in *Christian Counseling Today*, citing this *TIME* article, said in a study of behaviors of popular porn, nearly 90% of 304 random scenes contained physical aggression toward women, who nearly always responded neutrally or with pleasure.

<sup>5</sup> Research discussed in the footnotes of *The Meaning of Marriage* by Tim and Kathy Keller.

<sup>6</sup> [https://endsexualexploitation.org/wp-content/uploads/NCOSE\\_Pornography-PublicHealth\\_ResearchSummary\\_8-2\\_17\\_FINAL-with-logo.pdf](https://endsexualexploitation.org/wp-content/uploads/NCOSE_Pornography-PublicHealth_ResearchSummary_8-2_17_FINAL-with-logo.pdf) Accessed online 1/30/20.

Think of all the impact on people we love. It's why God's Word, in verse 26, lovingly admonishes us to give careful thought to our paths, steadfastly walking in God's ways. For what we're doing is either forming or deforming us as people.

One more difficult question, after which we will shift to hope, helpful resources, and God's fatherly heart. As people watch porn, experiencing pleasure without connecting with a real person or having to serve in any way, how does that shape hearts? That book, *Premarital Sex in America*, found that a significant number of male porn-users experience a diminished desire for the difficulties of real relationship and marriage.<sup>7</sup>

Christian author C.S. Lewis once got a letter asking about masturbation, and his response was later published. It describes well the deforming relational impact of pornography and the masturbation that's often with it.

Lewis says, "For me the real evil of masturbation would be that it takes an appetite which, in lawful use, leads the individual out of himself to complete (and correct) his own personality in that of another (and finally in children and even grandchildren) and turns it back: sending the man back into the prison of himself, there to keep a harem of imaginary brides. And this harem, once admitted, works against his ever getting out and really uniting with a real woman. For the harem is always accessible, always subservient, calls for no sacrifice or adjustments, and can be endowed with erotic and psychological attractions which no real woman can rival. Among these shadowy brides he is always adored, always the perfect lover: no demand is made on his unselfishness, no mortification is ever imposed on his vanity. In the end, they become merely the medium through which he increasingly adores himself."<sup>8</sup>

Life is about loving relationships, and Lewis' quote describes how sexual sin actively works against this, turning us back on ourselves. A 2016 *TIME* Magazine article, by Belinda Luscombe, ends with a tragic quote from a 30-something porn user who says, "When I think about it, I've wasted years of my life looking for a computer or mobile phone to provide something it is not capable of providing."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Research discussed in the footnotes of *The Meaning of Marriage* by Tim and Kathy Keller.

<sup>8</sup> Quote accessed on 1/29/20 at <https://redeeminggod.com/bible-theology-topics/c-s-lewis/>. It comes from Lewis' book *Yours, Jack*.

<sup>9</sup> I got this quote from a presentation from EFCA national leader Greg Strand. I accessed the *Time* article online on 1/30/20 at <https://time.com/4277510/porn-and-the-threat-to-virility/>

God wants so much more for His children than this, for us to experience healthy, life-changing relationships with Him and with others. So we're going to hear a personal story about that, would you join me in welcoming Michael to the stage? (*set up mic, close my Bible*)

*[testimony shared here]*

Would you join me in praising God for His work and thanking Michael? Thank you, brother for sharing so honestly. You're helping us be a place of genuine, masks off, relating and hope for those struggling; and thank you Anna for allowing God to work through you in that difficult season.

### **Next Steps**

*For those struggling with porn* – We've seen this morning ways that porn deforms our hearts, and other people's, hearts. So as verse 23 says, "Above all else, guard your heart". I want to suggest some next steps for those struggling with porn. First, I want to amen Michael's sharing about the importance of handing our sin struggles over to God and also to confiding in trusted believers.

One place to seek these relationships is in our church's small groups. I know Michael's story because we're in care group together, where we split up as guys and girls to share and pray for each other, and Michael has given the guys an open door to ask how things are going.

Satan loves secrecy and shame, because sin grows best in the dark, and so bringing our struggles to God and trusted believers is vital. And as more of our relational needs are met in healthier ways in those relationships, it also decreases the temptation to meet our relational needs in illegitimate ways, like with porn.

Porn can be addictive. When you're excited sexually, the chemical opioid is released in your brain. This opioid release is wonderful in the context of a loving marriage, which God designed sex for, because the intense physical pleasure bonds a husband and wife together, brings joy to the relationship, and helps the spouses to love each other in the hardships of life.

But sadly, people sometimes use pornography to try to manage shame in their life. The porn use becoming both a temporary escape from shame through the opioid release, and also a search for approval through the fantasy of imagining oneself being very desired.

So dealing with pornography use, which is sometimes accompanied with underlying shame and trauma, can be complex and challenging, so many times additional resources are

needed. Resources like Be Broken, a local ministry helping individuals and families impacted by sexual addiction; resources like a Christian counselor who can help with sexual struggles, any underlying issues, and also help the other spouse, and online resources like covenanteyes.com.

Seeking out help is a sign of strength, it shows that you are strong enough to admit your struggles and strong enough to pursue the best resources to help. I'm for you and want you to benefit from all the resources that would help your home.

There are also many great Christian books on the subject, I'll name two. The first is *Healing the Wounds of Sexual Addiction* by Mark Laaser. Second is *Shattered Vows* by Debbie Laaser, a book for a spouse married to someone struggling with sexual sin. The Laasers also have a powerful testimony of God bringing great healing and growth after a traumatic season that included a pornography addiction. God's still in the business of changing lives.

*For parents to stay involved* – And if you have younger kids at home, Kristen Jenson, author of *Good Pictures Bad Pictures: Porn-Proofing Today's Young Kids*, has a few recommendations.

First, she suggests that parents define pornography so that kids know what it is. Jenson describes pornography to seven-year-olds like this: "Pornography is people without any clothes on that may make you feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, or sick to your stomach and may also make you feel excited."

Second, she suggests you coach your kids to tell you if they see pornography. Kids often need to be coached to confide in their parents. And let's be the kinds of parents that encourage sharing by addressing issues openly and by not flipping out when told something concerning.

Third, she suggests that you password protect your digital devices and take advantage of filtering software. The website [pornproofkids.com](http://pornproofkids.com) has instructions on this<sup>10</sup> and Steven Waling from our church family said he's happy to be a tech resource for you. Steven's contact info is in the church directory out in the lobby.

If you have older kids, I think you'll be helped by a description from Christian author Andy Crouch, who wrote *The Tech-Wise Family*, a book we talked about in last Sunday's digital devices and media sermon.

Crouch says, "So my friend Matt, who has four middle- and high-school-age sons, has told each one, 'I'm your dad. Until you are grown, it's my job to know more about what's going

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<sup>10</sup><http://pornproofkids.com/2014/07/24/two-levels-of-internet-safety-one-moms-advice-on-filters/> Accessed 2/20/15.



on in your life – and therefore on your phone – than anyone else.’ His sons know that he can, and will, look over their shoulder at any moment, and that he can, and will, and does, pick up their phone without needing to ask and browse through their messages and apps and history. To many parents, and to nearly every American teenager, this will seem like an impossible invasion of ‘privacy.’ But Matt’s sons have plenty of privacy. He doesn’t barge into their bedrooms, and he can’t, and wouldn’t want to, police their secret thoughts or their conversations with friends at school. He makes a great deal of room for his sons to come to their own conclusions about their convictions and to develop, or not, their inner spiritual and emotional lives. What Matt understands, though, is that if mature adults struggle to handle the pipeline of temptation, titillation, and distraction that comes with 24/7 access to the internet, there is no way still developing teenagers can handle it. His oversight is strictest where the technology is the most powerful and potentially out of control. And when you spend time with Matt, his wife, Kim, and their boys – and with his sons’ friends, who flock to him because of his infectious sense of humor, his relentless respect for kids, his willingness to ask and answer any question, his warmth as well as his strictness, and perhaps above all his endless humility and openness about his own struggles and failures from his high school years to the present – you realize he’s the kind of dad every child is dying to know.”<sup>11</sup> May we all parent to build faith at home.

*God’s fatherly heart for those struggling (Luke 15)* – Finally, let’s remember God’s fatherly heart. If you’ve got a Bible or Bible app, turn to Luke chapter 15. There Jesus tells a story that reflects our heavenly Father’s heart for those struggling in habitual sin.

So there’s a Father with two sons. The younger demands his share of the estate, a very shameful act in that culture which means that he wishes his father was dead. The younger son then leaves his home and its values, setting off for a distant country and wasting his illegitimate inheritance in wild, sinful living. After losing all of his money and new friends, the son hits rock bottom. Filthy and starving, he decides to return home and ask his Father not to receive him as a son, since he’s unworthy, but to hire him as a servant. Let’s pick it up in verse 20. **(20-24)**

<sup>20</sup> So he got up and went to his father. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I

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<sup>11</sup> Crouch, Andy, *The Tech-Wise Family*, 175-177.

am no longer worthy to be called your son.’<sup>22</sup> “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.’<sup>23</sup> Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate.’<sup>24</sup> For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.”

Rembrandt’s famous painting of this scene is on the screen. I invite you to look at it and see God’s posture towards His wayward children. He’s filled with compassion for you, longing to see you return home so He can throw His arms around you and kiss you.

And if you’re thinking our heavenly Father would never look over the horizon for a sexual sinner like you, that He’d never long to see you return home, or open His arms wide to you, look at verse 30. There we learn that the younger son’s struggles included squandering his inheritance on prostitutes, he too struggled with sexual sin.

And yet, look at the picture. It represents our heavenly Father’s heart towards all of us who have left Him and His ways. He is looking over the horizon for us, longing to see us return home, and when we do, filled with compassion, He will run to you, throw His arms around you, and kiss you, deeply grateful that His son or daughter is home.

We’re about to take the Lord’s Supper. So as Jack comes up front to lead us, this is a great time to return to our heavenly Father. To confess and repent of our sin, to receive His forgiveness and loving embrace, and to surrender to His good will and ways for our lives. Our heavenly Father longs to welcome you home.