

# BodyLife Past Article Archive

## Sexual Struggles on the Relational Journey

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BodyLife • April 2005

Shocked!?!?! I hope not, some of you probably are and there's no doubt not everyone will see these sensitive things the same way I do. I know how hard it was for me to write this and to decide to make it the subject of a BodyLife issue.

Dealing with sexuality in the context of our spiritual journeys can be a bit jarring and that is no accident. Religion doesn't teach us how to deal with sex. Rather it prefers to keep our sexuality and our spirituality in two separate worlds. It tosses sexuality into a dark closet, slams the door and posts the rules for everyone to keep. Some can, others can only pretend to.

A few months ago, I received this desperate plea from a young mother:

***"Have you any resources that you would suggest or could you address pornography addiction somehow on your site? I am struggling with hurt and I do not know who to go to. My father has struggled with this, I think my brother has, and my husband is struggling. I don't understand it and it hurts..." (You can read my answer to her here.)***

And I didn't have anything to point to on this site. I found that incredible and sad. Sexual pleasure and sexual brokenness are common themes in our age, and they come up repeatedly every day. Why is it, then, that we rarely talk about sexuality in the context of our spiritual journeys? Scripture does not share our reticence. Sexual themes permeate its stories and teachings, highlighting not only the glory of sexuality in God's creation, but also its power to destroy those who misuse it.

So maybe it's time we think through sexuality and our spiritual journeys. I'll admit that I haven't got the final answers on any of this, but I do want to begin a discussion that will allow Jesus to bring greater freedom into this area. My observations are derived from helping a variety of people through these issues over the last 30 years.

And feel free to read between the lines here. What we learn about sexual struggles will also be true of other sins, how it is that God takes us from captivity into freedom, and how religious thinking unwittingly makes that journey more difficult.

### **An Incredible Gift**

Some have said that God's command to be fruitful and multiply is the only one humanity has obeyed.

Look at the incentive it took to get us to do that!

The excitement and pleasure of a husband and wife sharing themselves physically in an environment of growing love and trust is an incredible gift. It begins in the yearnings of youth and grows when held in trust for a future spouse. It grows greater through the early years of marriage as a couple shapes a sexual life together with a passion to please each other and to celebrate their love with the deepest connection and greatest joy two people can experience.

So it would be no surprise that sin would twist that gift into a weapon for our own destruction. The quest for immediate sexual gratification will always be at odds with our ultimate freedom to celebrate this gift in its most valued fashion. In a Carl's Jr. commercial last year Playboy's Hugh Hefner extolled the virtue of having a different kind of hamburger every night instead of the same old thing. The double-entendre was clear - sex is best with a line of ever-changing partners. How wrong he is! Mr. Hefner will never know the heights of ecstasy that can only come from growing in an exclusive, healthy and vibrant sexual relationship with the same woman over the course of a lifetime.

Sadly, many have bought into his philosophy that we can disconnect the act of sex from relationship and use it for our own amusement without any lasting damage. I am amazed how easily even teens today talk about hooking up for one-night sexual adventures, or designate 'friends with privileges' for those they'll satisfy sexually with no enduring commitment. Only when our society has to pick up the pieces of sexual abuse, a marriage destroyed by an affair, young lives shattered from being sexually used and discarded, or the trauma of sexually-transmitted diseases or an unwanted pregnancy, does it really pause to reflect that maybe God knew what he was talking about.

And here our culture gives mixed messages. Almost every celebration of love, even in secular culture, expresses its yearning to be exclusive and eternal. I will love you only, and love you always. I have never performed a wedding ceremony for a couple who had held themselves abstinent until marriage, who regretted doing so. And they reap the benefits of that in the early days of marriage, discovering the joys and techniques of growing sexually together. The fact that they valued this gift and their future partner enough to save themselves is a powerful foundation upon which to build the trust in which relationship thrives.

### **What If I've Already Missed It?**

Of course not everyone knew enough in their youth to make this choice, nor had strength enough to resist the temptations they faced. Others may have gone through divorce or the death of a spouse. What do we say to them?

We tend to view God's ideal as a pass/fail test. If it is, then once you've missed that mark, you might as

well just give up. But the New Testament makes it clear that God's ideal is a promise of freedom that he will work in you. If you let God shape you with his desires you can still experience with ever-increasing glory God's best for you. His forgiveness will cover your failure and his restoration opens up a new future to embrace your sexuality as God designed it.

I know it isn't easy. My heart goes out to those who have lost their way in temptation or in the struggle with sexual thoughts and appetites. Nothing keeps men I've talked to from living confidently in God like the shame of their sexual failures. That struggle is made even more difficult by the sexually obsessed culture we live in. And I'm not just talking about pornography or MTV videos. So many things in our culture tear at our sexuality as Madison Avenue appeals to our sexual urges to sell everything from milk to cars. Provocative clothing has become the norm for women, and for men who are easily stimulated visually (that's most of us!) our culture provides a constant haze of sexual stimulation. And sometimes even the most innocent glance or conversation will provoke temptation.

Sexual brokenness is rampant in our culture and manifests itself in a number of ways from outright sexual affairs, to emotional attractions for someone other than a spouse, to indulging in pornography or simply being tormented by fantasies that one cannot turn off. The accessibility of pornography and stimulating entertainments has grown exponentially in the media and on the Internet. No one has to get in their car and drive to the seedy part of town and risk being seen sneaking into an 'adult' store. A pit of sexual indulgence is only a mouse click away.

So we're caught in quite a dilemma. God has given us a precious gift of sexuality and with it a drive that is often stronger than our will to resist its abuse. Our culture and the twisted nature of sin conspire to beckons us to squander God's gift for instant gratification.

## **Just Say No?**

Religion is notorious for underscoring the rules, demanding complicity and punishing those who fall short. It's only counsel for sexual bondage is to just say no. If you love Jesus enough you will not yield to temptation. What kind of hope is that?

I heard a health educator to a secular audience say it as clearly as it can be said: "'Just say no!' hasn't worked since the two most innocent people got it from the highest possible authority." Adam and Eve in their innocence found themselves face to face with a 'no' they could not resist. If 'just say no' is the answer, then discipline is all we need to live free. Certainly some of us can muster enough discipline to live purely, at least outwardly. But Paul tells us that we are helpless in sin (Romans 5) and even those who may be able to deny themselves externally can still be tormented on the inside.

Jesus warned us in his Sermon on the Mount that just because you don't commit adultery doesn't mean

you've fulfilled the law. If you even look at another person with lust then you've committed adultery in your heart. I used to hate that. I didn't want to be guilty of something I worked so hard to deny. Of course, Jesus wasn't telling us that if you're thinking it you might just as well go ahead and do it. And he wasn't trying to multiply our guilt either. What he wanted us to see is that our bondage run deeper than mere actions, and so does God's healing.

Those who think just having the discipline to say no is Father's fix, will find themselves either becoming proficient at hiding or excusing their failures, or give up altogether - thinking they'll never be disciplined enough to make it in this kingdom. Amazingly those who scream 'Just say no!' the loudest are often caught later hiding their own failures. One pastor angered people by forcing young couples he married to confess their promiscuity to families and friends at their wedding. It came out years later that during that time that pastor was involved in an affair of his own.

As we shall see if you think piling on shame for sexual failure will deter future failures you are sadly misguided. The manipulation of shame in the face of sexual failure doesn't advance healing; it only deepens the bondage by keeping it in the dark where it grows best. Those who struggle with sexual brokenness will find themselves acting out most when they feel condemned and distant from God.

### **So How Do We Fix It?**

I hope I can be clear here. You can't! You can't! You can't! This is not something you can do, but something Jesus can accomplish in you. The temptation to sexual indulgence is the most powerful and conflicting you'll ever meet, and only a growing, vibrant relationship with the living God will displace its influence and free you to live God's freedom.

I'm convinced that a lot of sexual bondage is perpetuated out of boredom and the self-focused life our society worships. A major way God displaces sin in our life is by giving us a higher purpose that captures our hearts and guides us through a day. Knowing him and engaging his agenda each day in our lives will save us from being captured in the bondage of our own comfort or amusement. So our focus needs to be less on trying not to do something as it is on engaging a reality so much larger than ourselves.

That's not to say there aren't specific ways we can look for God to touch our sexual brokenness. And I hope you're not looking for a prescribed set of steps that you can follow to sexual healing. Jesus sorts these things out in a personal relationship with him and as I've walked with folks through these things I notice he so personalizes the healing process to the reality of each individual, that any prescribed plan would only work for a few and leave others feeling left out. So instead let me offer some thoughts that might help us recognize his work in this area.

Demystify your sexual struggles. Religion has made it a hornet's nest of misinformation and deep-seated

bias. Let me say at the outset that I embrace what Scripture says about healthy sexuality and what it identifies as sexual sin. Paul warned us that sexual failure destroys something deep inside us (1 Cor. 6) and yet it is obvious from his letters that all of the early congregations struggled with sexual temptation.

Remember you are not alone. Other brothers and sisters share your struggle. A well-known seminary did a survey a few years ago on the hidden addictions of Christian leaders and found that 55% of pastors confessed to regular use of Internet pornography. And that's just those who were honest enough with themselves to admit it.

Sexual brokenness is not the last, great sin in the human experience. We all know what sexual temptation is like, even if the object of those temptations may be different. We've got to let him sort out the condemnation and humiliation religion has imbedded in sexual temptation because it only makes it stronger. And shame keeps us from the one thing that can free us from sexual bondage - a growing relationship of trust and intimacy with Jesus.

And there's the conflict, isn't it? I can't be free until I have a relationship, but I'm too shamed in my failures to have the relationship. But the cross of Jesus solved that paradox. It reconciled our shame in the mercy of God, so that we would find him the safest place to be at our most broken. As we lean into him more each day, he will unwire our brokenness and channel our passions in ways that please him and fulfill his desire in us.

## **Walking Out of the Darkness**

It might be helpful to view the struggle for freedom at three levels.

- The first is dealing with the sexual temptations and fantasies that are a part of a normal sex drive. You don't act on them, but they do filter into your thinking and challenge your resistance not to indulge them in ways that can result in greater bondage.
- The second level of bondage is marked by more protracted sexual thoughts that harass you almost constantly and which are acted out privately, either through role-playing, indulging fantasies, or viewing pornography. This includes aberrant sexual appetites, homosexuality and gender confusion.
- The third level is overt sexual sin, engaged in with another person, either in cultivating an illicit emotional relationship or outright sexual activity.

Obviously the later two are of greatest concern and freedom at those levels will require an intentional choice on your part to sort out with Jesus why these fantasies have set such a deep hook in you and how it is that he will liberate you from them. Wherever you are you can start by surrendering yourself and your sexuality to Jesus. You've got to take this area seriously, with a desire to let him change your behavior and

get whatever help you need for that to be a reality.

Let me add a caveat here about masturbation because I know that this one struggle keeps more men from walking closely to Jesus more than anything else I know. I wouldn't suggest that self-gratification is a healthy way to deal with our sexual urges, but I find it odd that Scripture does not address something that is so prevalent in humanity. Nowhere does Scripture even mention it, much less forbid it, and that includes the story of Onan in Genesis 38.

The larger concern seems to be not the act itself, but the fantasies that go along with the act. Some think that is enough to forbid it, but I think that overreaches. This is something each one needs to sort out with God, especially knowing what he defines as sin and lust that captures our heart. And if you have to hide something from your spouse, that's a pretty good sign it is not honorable even in your own eyes. In the meantime, don't let this behavior push you away from Jesus, but let it draw you to him all the more.

Ask him to show you why you treat sex the way you do and why certain images incite your passions and why, beyond the rush of pleasure, do you succumb to its devices. You have to see it as more than just a moment of brief euphoria brought on by a weak will, and let him show you why it has become your drug of choice. Perhaps some formative event started you down this path, either abuse or great loss. God knows and he loves you enough to walk this through with you into absolute freedom.

As he does he will show you how sexual brokenness dehumanizes you and your spouse (even if he or she is still in the future). Real sexuality is about relationship first and pleasure second. Marriages that are affair-proof celebrate their sexuality as a relationship between best friends, not an act of pleasure or duty between two bodies.

## **Some Final Thoughts**

Those of you who are young, it will serve you best to sort out these things early in your life. Don't believe the world's lie that sex can be casual and that it can be separated from a life-long relationship, or buy religion's lie that you're powerful enough to overcome temptation on your own.

By all means, resist sexual temptation wherever you can, for as long as you can. When you falter, don't waste time bashing yourself or wallowing in shame. Don't make promises you can't keep because they will just increase your guilt and push you further from him. Instead, run to his presence, presenting yourself to him in failure and asking him what it is about you that is broken. He will show you.

Ask him to give you someone who will walk in this struggle with you. Brothers find a brother, and sisters another sister, not for accountability per se, but for compassion, prayer and support. Be careful here. Make sure this is someone you can trust to support you in the struggle, not load you up with guilt or expose your failures to others.

Beware of sexual or romantic fantasies that rob you of the true joy of sexuality. While couples can explore a variety of ways to make their lovemaking fun and playful, fantasies by definition are not reality. When you give yourself to being turned on by that which does not exist, you will miss the treasure of what does. Unrealistic fantasies do not help us enjoy sex more. They slowly dismantle real sexuality by dehumanizing your spouse and the act itself. Isn't it amazing that with the rise of sexual imagery and exploitation in our culture, sexual dysfunction is growing at an astounding rate? I know there can be genuine physical reasons that Viagra and other enhancing drugs can be a real godsend in a marriage, but I also wonder how much of these chemicals are needed because indulging in unreal fantasies has robbed us of the truest joys right before us.

Those of you who have spouses whom you know are struggling with pornography, find a way to share that struggle together if you can do it with grace. As hard as this may be, don't just react to it as if his indulgence in pornography is a rejection of you. These traps often get set at young ages, and are not easily broken. A man can be madly in love with his wife, care about her deeply, be turned on by her and still find pornography a cheap, temporal thrill.

This is where society has really conspired against people getting whole. The pressure on women to compete with fantasy images is unbearable. And, because women are wired differently they will see pornography as a personal betrayal. Let me assure you that that is rarely the case and your spouse was probably involved with it long before he met you. (For more comments on this, you can read the email I wrote to the young mother who first asked the question, on our website.)

I know there is much left unanswered here. How do couples build a mutually fulfilling sex life without using sex or its frequency as a weapon? Is there a difference between appreciating God's creation in a beautiful woman without being lustful? How can women grow up healthy in a culture that judges them by external beauty and that with impossible standards? Why are some tempted by aberrant sexual desires while others are not? I can't cover all that here but I do know that religious answers to these questions are not enough to lead people into God's healing.

But he is enough. God wants us to experience our sexuality as the gift he gave us - joyfully linked to a life-long relationship of growing trust and joy, rather than squandering it for momentary cheap thrills that leave us empty and alone. Yes, it can be a huge battle that may take some time, but let me encourage you to take this freedom seriously and let him lead you to the gift of righteousness that a growing trust in him provides.

I said, that I hoped this article would begin a bit of dialogue, and some interesting 'extras' have come in. You can find that at the links below:

- **My response to the woman who first wrote.**
- **A song from a good friend about sexual freedom.** It is track #7 Look to Jesus.

- **Feedback from two brothers who are finding increasing freedom in their struggle.**
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