

# LOVE | HATE | RELATIONSHIP | PORN

John Greenall considers a better story





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When I was 18 my friend Dave turned to me one day and said 'I can't keep going on like this. I'm off'. And with that, he didn't set foot in church for the next five years.

The thing is, he loved porn. But he knew Jesus hated it. He told no one about it. He hated himself. He kept saying sorry to God, but he felt powerless to resist the urges. And so he gave up.

You have probably read lots about pornography. According to *covenanteyes.com*, one in five mobile searches are for pornography and 24% of smartphone users in the UK admit to having pornographic material on their phones.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps you watch it – in the US, 64% of Christian men and 15% of Christian women say they watch porn at least once a month.<sup>2</sup> Because porn use thrives in secrecy, many Christians are trapped in a cycle of sin and shame, thinking that they're the only ones facing this temptation, like Dave did.

Even if porn simply disgusts you, or isn't an issue for you, understanding its impact means we are better equipped to help those that we counsel in the church, as fellow medics and our patients. Porn is one of the defining matters of our age. As Christians and as medics we have a unique opportunity to understand and minister to those who struggle.

## 'I love porn'

Do you know non-Christians who say this? My colleague James does. He enjoys porn. He says it's an easy 'hit' after a hard day on the wards, offering intimacy without the risk of real relationships. Others might say they love it because it can be accessed for free

and in private where 'no-one can see me' and therefore there are 'no consequences'. Or that it's exciting when the world around can often be boring, offering escapism to distract them from the realities of work or revision.

And yet many Christians love porn as well; like Dave. Does that shock you? Well it shouldn't. If we believe that all human beings are capable of sin, then we must see that Christians are not immune. As a generalisation, males often choose to lust, to look at a woman as an object and desire to have sex with her. Women are perhaps more prone to want to be lusted after, perhaps wishing for a better body so that men desire them more.

Pornography is essentially an outlet for lust, hugely magnified. You don't need to look at a man or woman directly – you can look at your screen, at a magazine, at a film. We can all do it. But why? Your answer may be 'because we are fallen' – and we will deal with the fall shortly. But let me be provocative here – the main reason so many look at porn so regularly is because we were made to love porn. Let me unpack that a little before you stop reading!

Men and women are designed by God to be naturally wired to desire the opposite sex. When Adam and Eve were created, they were made perfect, with perfect bodies. God made them to enjoy one other's bodies and to be able to express this in lovemaking. In Proverbs we read: *'May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer – may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be intoxicated with her love'* (5:18-19). The Song of Solomon outlines a man and a woman enjoying one other's bodies in explicit detail.<sup>3</sup> He declares sex to be very



good! And so it doesn't mean you are dirty to have these desires.

But God's declaration is intended within the boundaries of marriage. *'...a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.* (Genesis 2:24-25). Marriage is a safe space – where promises are made; where there is mutual safety and trust; where sex is an extension of a love relationship not simply a lust relationship. In this context, the lack of guilt and secrecy, amid myriad other benefits, leads to sex the way God intended – the very best.

We need to grasp God's good plan for humankind, otherwise we won't know what to do with the desires we have. Like my friend Dave, we can feel dirty, condemned and afraid; afraid that I can't surely be a Christian if I am tempted to look at porn; that I am the only one.

Some of you reading need to be honest – you love porn. And yet some of you may feel, at least some of the time, the opposite...

### 'I hate porn'

Perhaps you feel like another friend of mine, Anna. She hates porn. She rages about the damaging effects of porn on society and on an individual's health.

For example, a YouGov survey found that 27% of boys were accessing pornography every week, with 5% viewing it every day.<sup>4</sup> Prolonged exposure to porn from a young age is thought to lead to an exaggerated perception of sexual activity in society, diminished trust between intimate couples, belief that abstinence and sexual inactivity are unhealthy and belief that marriage is sexually confining.<sup>5</sup>

Even a self-confessed atheist medic recently wrote 'Never mind the moral arguments about

porn, there is a sound neurological reason to do everything we can to limit teenagers' exposure to it'.<sup>6</sup> And a former 'lads' mag' editor wrote 'Like many parents, I fear that my boy's childhood could be taken away by pornography'.<sup>7</sup>

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### many look at porn and yet simultaneously hate it. Why might that be?

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As well as societal impact, porn impacts individuals who indulge in it. It's interesting to note that many look at porn and yet simultaneously hate it. Why might that be? A recent article offered the statistic that 'one in five people who regularly watch porn admitted to feeling controlled by their own sexual desires'.<sup>8</sup> Recent data suggest that consistent exposure to pornographic images actually rewires the brain which can be trained and eventually subjected to addictive behaviors. By consistently pursuing pornography, men 'have unknowingly created a neurological circuit that imprisons their ability to see women rightly as created in God's image'.<sup>9</sup>

Porn is now thought to be 'more addictive than cocaine or heroin, usable in the privacy of one's own home and injected directly to the brain through the eyes'.<sup>10</sup> Knowing we are being rewired and trapped by what we see, it's no wonder we can feel at the very least uncomfortable about it.

Watching porn also has profound implications for those being watched. Nowadays the typical performer is in her late teens or early twenties, was sexually abused or raped in childhood, addicted to drugs or alcohol, and desperate.

She likely first entered the industry while still a child.<sup>11</sup> The industry perpetuates the lie that this woman that I have just described likes you; that she wants to perform for you. The reality is that she is either paid or forced to engage in these acts, or even both, whether explicitly or implicitly through life circumstances. Furthermore, if we believe that God makes this woman as the pinnacle of his creation, of the highest value and dignity, then why do we watch her being violated and humiliated? God says, 'I hate it when her body and soul is stained' and you say, 'It turns me on'.<sup>12</sup>

We could go on and on – you don't have to look far or have a vivid imagination to consider the multiple effects of pornography on our children, women and men in our society.

The Bible describes the reason for this fallout way back in Genesis 3, just a few verses after God's good intention for sex is revealed to Adam and Eve. Something had happened between these two people – and they hadn't become ugly overnight! No, not only is their relationship broken with God, but shame has entered and fractured the relationship between one another.<sup>13</sup> Eve realises that this man had disobeyed God and had been selfish. 'If he has been so selfish, how might he treat me? He might start to be unkind or cruel, criticise my wobbly bits; he'll put himself first and might put me down. So I can't trust him, because he might shame me.'

This fracturing of relationship between man and woman continues today – sex is misused. Lusting after someone other than your spouse is rife. The consequences on ourselves and in society are profound. So when we say we hate porn, we are saying we hate misplaced lust and we are recognising the tragic consequences and the shame of our position before God and one another.

Of course in a very real sense Adam and Eve's reaction was healthy. They were right to distrust each other. And God graciously clothed them that they might not walk in shame – and he continues to do so to this day. However, in our society we see a reversal of this – where clothing is increasingly designed to titillate, where sex between strangers is acceptable, and where porn becomes more mainstream. The apostle Paul's statement in Ephesians 4:19 was to society at that time, but it applies equally today: *'Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity'*.

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### this fracturing of relationship between man and woman continues today – sex is misused

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As sensitivity is lost and conscience is dulled, we see a society going further and further away from God. And it is a warning for Christians that their hearts can be hardened and that continuing in sin will mean it becomes harder to repent the longer and further we go. The fall has had profound consequences for our relationship with God, but as we have seen also within ourselves and between each other.

We are called to hate porn – we are called to seriously consider what it cost Jesus on the cross, what it cost the father to give his only son, to bring us back into right relationship with him and others – images of God. Hating ourselves for not loathing porn, or condemning those who struggle with porn misses the point. We are all fallen; we must warn and teach God's truth, and yet we must also stand alongside, help to rescue and then restore the broken in and through God's word.



## a love-hate thing

I suspect, however, that many of us are like another close friend of mine, Ola, who feels caught between the above statements. At times he loves porn – the escapism, the release, the ease of it. And yet at other times he hates what it is doing to himself, to others and to his relationship with God. If that is how you feel, let me encourage you – it is an indicator of someone who is saved, who is sensitive to truth, and who has the possibility of knowing full and lasting freedom. Unregenerate people will not feel this battle. As long as you are fighting – even feebly – be encouraged; be reassured.

## idolatry promises more and more and delivers less and less until it has everything and you have nothing

But battle we must – we are called to ‘flee the evil desires of youth’ (2 Timothy 2:22a); to believe that there is more joy in God’s presence than in sin;<sup>14</sup> to believe that sexual relations are not essential to fulfilment and happiness;<sup>15</sup> to avoid tempting situations even if it inconveniences us;<sup>16</sup> to meditate on what Christ has done for us on the cross;<sup>17</sup> and to not be a lone ranger but to be accountable and encourage one another.<sup>18</sup> So be encouraged – keep fighting!

## believe the better story

The narrative in our society, acted out by attractive, funny actors, that we see on every sitcom and YouTube channel is incredibly persuasive and powerful. It’s the story of the sexual revolution – sexual freedom, no constraints, do-as-you-please.

## but is it delivering?

I believe, as we began to only scratch the surface above, that the resounding answer is no! It is simply idolatry – and as Tim Keller says, ‘idolatry promises more and more and delivers less and less until it has everything and you have nothing’;<sup>19</sup> does this ring a bell with any porn addicts reading this?

Let me ask you – what’s your story? Is it the story of creation, fall and redemption? Creation of sex, fall of sex and redemption of sex? We need to understand, believe and then tell the better story of a God who made us in his image, who made us to enjoy sex in the context of marriage, and to live truly free and joyful lives. The story that will stand for eternity whilst all other stories come to an (often slow and painful) end.

Are you living knowing the power of the cross having victorious in your life?

Do you believe that God can hijack back the neural pathways of pornography and transform them into pathways that transmit the joys of knowing Jesus?

Let’s point ourselves and others to the better story of the gospel – relationship with Jesus himself. Because it’s true – and it works! That is the best story we can tell.

## let’s get real

We also need to be intensely practical about this. There are numerous articles and books you can read on this subject, for example *Captured by a Better Vision* by Tim Chester, who is speaking at the CMF Student Conference in 2016.<sup>20</sup> Covenant eyes have a terrific resources on their site as well as accountability software.<sup>21</sup> Personally I have found the following helpful: accountability software; accountability with another in the context of whole-life

(not limiting our chats to confession of sin!); recognising the triggers (eg boredom, late nights, tiredness, self-pity, anger...) and memorising Scripture.

### satisfaction in Jesus

However, let's not get the impression we can do this in our own strength. Accountability software, rules and warnings can't do the job on their own. We need help. Because you can run from porn, but still love it more than Jesus. You can be losing that love-hate battle because you are not treasuring Christ more than porn.

This is the battleground – the affections of our hearts – to believe with our whole hearts that Jesus is of supreme worth. That he's more fulfilling and exciting than porn, indeed above all temporary satisfactions of this world. That we are made and redeemed for a completely satisfying relationship with God. And that we can live in this victory now and share that news with others – accepting the grace he extends to us in our time of need. We need to be soaked in the word of God to believe his better story, and to ask his help in seeking satisfaction in Christ above all else.

My friend Dave had a brutal and damaging five years – but I'm glad to say that he discovered this liberating truth – that Jesus is more satisfying than porn. God has restored him and now by his Spirit daily helps him fight to be satisfied in Jesus, free from porn. ■

\*note all names have been changed

### Questions to consider:

1. Who do you most identify with out of Dave, James, Anna and Ola? Why?
2. Is there something here that has really convicted you? Talk to God about it now.
3. If you need to make a practical step, why don't you chat to someone as soon as you can – grasp the mettle!
4. How can we as medics minister to others who struggle with porn?
5. Can you think of other Bible passages that help us be satisfied in Christ more than porn? Why not list some and meditate on them this coming week

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