

order him to move us on to eternity would be silly and presumptuous. His response would simply be to point us to the parable of the talents and remind us that he expects us to be faithful stewards of this life (Mt 25:14-30).

Several weeks ago I counseled with a young man who was struggling to live a consistent Christian life and be true to what he believed was God's plan for him. He was also struggling with intense depression over his failures and the overwhelming desire to end his life.

In the middle of our discussion he interrupted me and asked, "Why doesn't God just take us home to be with him? Why do we have to struggle with the failures of this life when he promises something better?"

"I don't know why God expects us to live a life on this earth with its pain and suffering," I replied, "but I do know that in his eternal plan human existence is important. He wants me to live out my life the best I can. You have to take that by faith."

The pair seemed to leave his face. Slowly he smiled back at me.

"You really believe that, don't you?" he said.

I nodded. He nodded back. It was the turning point in his therapy.

What is the hallmark of a dynamic and healthy spiritual life? It is *balance*—and this includes the balance between living now and living in the expectation of eternity. We are to be *in* the world, but not *of* it. We are to enjoy the fruits of this world, but not to let the search for them control us. When we achieve this kind of balance, our likelihood of developing a religious addiction—or any kind of addiction—is very small indeed.

NINE

## Addictions to Sex and Love

**T**HE MOST POWERFUL FORCE in the physical world is not the nuclear bomb—but sex! Addictions to alcohol and cocaine may be major problems for our age, but they pale into insignificance when compared with the ravages of sex gone wrong.

This powerful force derives part of its might from the complex system of hormones that program us to seek procreation. The other part comes from how our minds are programmed. We basically *learn* how to express our sex, and we can learn to express it either in a healthy manner or in a way that is distorted and ultimately damaging to our humanity. I continue to marvel at how something as beautiful and fulfilling as sex can become so murky and debased. But that's true for all the beautiful things of life, isn't it?

### IS ADDICTION TO SEX POSSIBLE?

Several years ago, I recall reading a letter to one of the syndicated "advice columns": I cannot repeat the exact

arousal, in other words, causes a rise in sexual tension. As arousal increases, a state of unrest is created that "craves" fulfillment. This is how the body is designed. Sexual intercourse or masturbation to climax then provides the "relief" which is even more profoundly tranquilizing because a state of heightened tension was created just before the climax.

It's like fasting before a big meal. You deprive yourself of food so as to increase the tension of hunger pangs. Then you satisfy the craving by binging. Whenever such a cycle of enhanced tension or appetite followed by a tension-relieving behavior occurs, the risk of addiction is strong.

3. *Sex stimulates excitement.* (Actually, this is part of the pleasure it affords.) Sexual arousal is a powerful stimulant. We don't fully understand the biochemistry of this arousal, but there is evidence of increased circulating adrenaline (heart rate and even blood pressure go up), triggering of the autonomic nervous system (skin conductance increases due to sweating), and release of a natural form of amphetamine. I am sure that my male readers will have experienced, as I have, sleep-disturbed nights when you have been sexually aroused but did not have an outlet for this arousal. The body becomes fully alive and alert. The mind won't let you off the hook and allow slumber. Your heart pounds away while your sex hormones crave fulfillment.

Now this sort of stimulation is in many respects more profound than that provided by many of the minor stimulant drugs like the caffeine of coffee or "wake-up" pills. The fact that the chemical changes originate from within makes no difference to the body. We can just as easily become addicted to our own body chemistry as we can to Colombian cocaine. This fact is so obvious that I am amazed it is not given greater prominence in drug counseling circles.

Some sociologists call the idea of sexual addiction a myth and question whether we can really apply the notion of "addiction" to sexual compulsions. Sexual addicts them-

letter, but it read something like this:

Please help! My husband started out with girlie magazines. Now he's renting porno VCR tapes. He spends more time with that stuff than he spends with me. I think he's obsessed with this garbage, which turns me off the more it turns him on. Is there such a thing as sexual addiction? Can anything be done about it?

In the published response, the columnist agreed that there is such a thing as "sexual addiction" and that the husband might well have it. She referred the letter writer to "Sexaholics Anonymous" and recommended that she insist that her husband seek help. (Sexaholics Anonymous is a program for both sexes who recognize that their preoccupation with sex is self-destructive.)

Was the columnist right? Can sex really be "addicting" in the strictest sense of the word? I believe it can, for several reasons:

1. *Sex provides pleasure.* I can say this from personal observation, but there is also research evidence to support the idea. No doubt a part of this is the possible tranquilizing effect of the hormones involved in sexual arousal. For example, the level of testosterone (the male sex hormone produced in the testes) rises when erotic stimulation occurs. This produces a feeling of well-being.<sup>1</sup> Orgasmic culmination produces a further pleasurable response, although many report that great pleasure is derived from the sexual encounter even when no climax has occurred. Research indicates that the experience of sexual pleasure is both physiological and psychological. It involves both body chemistry and a state of mind. With such profound pleasure to be had, it's little wonder that sex can become an addicting agent.

2. *Sex creates a cycle of creating and reducing tension.* Sexual

This phenomenon of perversion complicates and exacerbates the problems of sexual addiction. By perversion, I simply mean sexual experience that deviates from the "normal." I know that "normal" can be very relative. It ought not to take a great intellect or a Kinsey-like survey to tell us what ought to be the proper and healthy way to express sexuality—but we certainly do struggle as a culture to find a balance here. Most, if not all, perversions are in my opinion variants of sexual addiction, so as we explore perverted sex, I hope we will develop a clearer understanding of what normal sex is all about. It is not the part of behavior you can define with ten do's and don'ts.

There are three kinds of sexual addiction, therefore, that I propose to cover in this chapter on sexual addictions: lust, romantic love, and perversion. Before I can move into these topics, however, I want to examine both our God-given capacity for sex and the way "neurotic" or "false" guilt can be a barrier to God's power to help us.

#### THE NEED FOR A THEOLOGY OF SEX

I am convinced that we desperately need a "theology of sex" in our churches today. I don't mean stricter moral rules. What we need is a balanced understanding of what God intends for us in this area of our lives.

Just how big a problem sex is for many Christians is shown by the volume of mail I receive on the subject. I receive many letters from readers of my books. (This is one of the great joys of being a writer—books can travel to the four corners of the world more effectively than any person.) Because I often speak to ministerial groups, I also get letters from pastors about their personal struggles. And a great many of these involve sex.

Rather than break confidence by quoting any one pastor's letter, let me present a composite of several letters which

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selves, however, are not waiting for the scientists to make up their minds as to what it should be called. In the mid-1970s, a recovering alcoholic began experimenting with the Twelve Steps used by AA and applied them to his own sexual addiction. This gave birth to Sex Addicts Anonymous and later Sexaholics Anonymous (the group the advice columnist mentioned)—groups that are helping thousands of people to overcome their sexual addictions.

Sexual addictions can fall into several different categories. Lustful addictions (addictions to excessive sexual desire) are one form. Addictions to love and relationships are another. Perversions (addictions to distorted sexual practices) are yet another.

Sexual addictions can affect both males and females, although as a rule men and women seem to "prefer" different addictions. On the whole, males tend to be more prone to lustful addictions and females more likely to develop addictions to love and romance.

There is no question that males and females differ in both the biology and expression of sexuality.<sup>2</sup> Girls develop faster than boys, but males end up with greater physical strength. Females have greater tactile sensitivity and manual dexterity. Because males tend to be more aggressive (this may be more sociological than physical in its cause) and females more nurturing (they are the childbearers), differences in sexuality are bound to emerge. Males seem to need physical sex more than females, and females seem to need emotional sex or love more than males. Again, this may be purely cultural, and there are certainly many exceptions to this generalization, but my own observation of patients and friends supports this general statement. Males, for instance, seem to complain more about not getting enough sex than females but increasingly I hear similar complaints from my female patients. I also happen to believe that males tend to be more neurotic in their expression of sexuality than females; they seek to pervert sex more often.

gives a very accurate picture of the personal feelings of many ministers and devout Christian men:

Dear Dr. Hart:

I am writing you this letter because I cannot tell anyone else about my feelings. People would think I was a total hypocrite if they knew what I have to deal with. My problem is sex. Almost every day of my life I feel strong sexual urges that threaten to overwhelm me. I have a loving wife, and she responds willingly to my sexual advances—but it never seems to be enough.

I feel very ashamed that I always look upon other women as sexual objects. Even though I am committed to treating all women with respect, I battle to keep my sexuality chained within myself. I have always masturbated—as long as I can remember. At first I used soft porn, but in recent years I can't resist the hard-core stuff. My sexual drive sometimes is so hard to control that I start thinking of it as an evil itself.

God knows how often I have prayed for deliverance. At times, when I am preoccupied with a challenging task, the flames seem to die down, but I always know these short periods will never last. A sensuous picture or a friendly glance from someone I admire just sends me into a frenzy again.

I don't think I'm the only one with this problem—in fact I know I'm not. The few fellow pastors I have shared my feelings with seem to struggle just as I do. I've studied all the books on temptation and know the verbiage and ten-point lists of advice—"Just stop thinking about sex," they say—but that's easier said than done. My only hope lies in the anticipation that as I get older the fire will slowly subside.

I present this letter to show that even the best among us must struggle with this, the most powerful of forces. The

truth is that we are all tempted sexually and must constantly do battle with our hormones. This is not to say we cannot gain victory over our sexual urges. But such victory begins by facing the struggle honestly and admitting our deepest feelings.

There are two factors in our Christian subculture that contribute to the development of sexual addictions. The first is the reluctance (at least among males) to own up to and talk about our sexual urges and struggles. This reinforces denial, a major factor in addiction. The second factor is the breeding of guilt feelings.

The greater our burden of guilt, the stronger will be our urges in the realm of sexuality. (Obsessions and compulsions, for instance, are often an attempt to resolve deep-seated guilt feelings.) Conversely, the stronger our urges, the greater our feelings of guilt. The result is an addictive cycle that is very difficult to break.

What feeds the high incidence of guilt feelings we find in Christian circles?

1. *We are invested in a holy calling.* Pastor or layperson, we long to be holy and to follow Christ's example of purity and faithfulness to the Father. Driven by an unrelenting force of hormones, we then find ourselves focusing all our thoughts, behavior, and energy on sex, and this seems to be at variance with God's standards.<sup>3</sup>

2. *We are expected to have impeccable moral character.* Others expect it of us, and we expect it of ourselves. I don't think I have ever met anyone who can honestly say, "I live up to the expectations I have of myself." We all feel a little hypocritical. Some of us feel a lot hypocritical.

3. *We feel we are called to help other people solve their sexual temptations, but we are tempted ourselves.* We believe that physicians should first "heal themselves." But if most of us had to wait until we had resolved all our sexual struggles, we would never be able to help anyone at all. Fortunately, God calls sinners to minister to sinners.

4. We have been taught to feel guilty about everything. The feeling of guilt is a major dynamic in neuroticism. It is also easily distorted by faulty teaching. If an excessive, rigid, and tyrannical conscience is created very early in life, it has great difficulty ever responding to forgiveness. Instead, it demands punishment.<sup>4</sup>

Given the preponderance of *guilt feelings* (as opposed to *true guilt*) in our Christian world, it is not at all surprising to find a high incidence of *obsessional sexuality*—people feeling that they cannot control their sexual feelings. The foundation for this guilt is to be found in early childhood, where all neurotic or false guilt is created.

By “false guilt” I mean an excessive urge for self-punishment that feeds the addictive process. This kind of guilt is not “false” in the sense that one is not sinning. It is false because one cannot or will not receive forgiveness for the sin.

It is at this point that conviction by the Holy Spirit differs from conscience. While we may or may not feel guilty when God convicts us, he creates a state of *true guilt* in which we became aware of the nature of the violation—from God’s perspective. This prompts us to repent, confess, change our ways, and receive forgiveness. True guilt, then, is designed for our healing.

False guilt, on the other hand, is unhealthy. It wants to wallow in self-pity, engages in persistent confession with no real desire for forgiveness, and flagellates self-esteem. What makes false guilt different from true guilt is it doesn’t want to be forgiven; it doesn’t want to change. Rather than accepting grace, it demands that we pay for our sins. And we do pay—through depression, emotional pain, and addiction to the very sin we are trying to avoid.

To illustrate, let me tell you Jon’s story. Several weeks ago he came to see me about a persistent problem with depression. At twenty-four years of age, he has not yet “settled down.” He is single and still living at home. He is

also a Christian, very active in church affairs. Jon’s depression problem started, he told me, at about the time he became a Christian at age nineteen. At fairly regular intervals he becomes self-pitying, sad, despondent, and despairing. He thinks about taking his life. “God must hate me,” he wails. “I let him down all the time. I’m unhappy and feel like a total failure.”

When I pushed him as to why he was depressed at that moment, he finally broke down and told me about a sexual encounter he had the past weekend. He is attracted to a girl at his church, and she likes him. They decided to go to a movie together on Saturday evening. After the movie they went back to her apartment, and despite his determination not to get involved sexually, he couldn’t resist her advances.

Now he feels terrible. Once again he has failed God. “I don’t deserve God’s love—I think I’ll just throw in the towel.”

As we explored Jon’s guilt feelings it became clear that his guilt had a large neurotic component. He *felt* guilty but had no desire to repent—deep down, he did not want to give up his sexual behavior. God was trying to deal with him, but his childish, self-pitying reaction kept God out. As long as he wallows in his guilt and refuses forgiveness, his lust will remain a part of his life.

We have now begun to work on Jon’s false guilt. He is beginning to understand why he does what he does and is starting to see some light at the end of the tunnel. Soon, I pray, God will break through his veneer of moralism and plant the seed of true righteousness.

### A CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF SEX

Christians have not been excluded from the impact of the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. Its effect has been twofold. On the one hand, we seem to have lost any real

ethical sense about sexuality. We don't know what is right anymore, and this creates serious problems for the future. At the same time, it seems that we have intensified our neurotic preoccupation with sex, creating an obsessional preoccupation with a need for extraordinary sexual excitement that is ravaging the emotions of pastors, Christian leaders, and laypersons. While you burn with passion, it is difficult to obey the call of Christ with a clear conscience.

What can be done about this problem? Is there a "theology of sex" that is relevant for today?

*Christianity Today* made an excellent beginning in a review of sexual mores entitled, "Great Sex: Reclaiming a Christian Sexual Ethic."<sup>5</sup> This article points out that the evangelical community has responded to the sexual revolution by trying to divorce a person's sexuality from his or her personhood. This is not biblical. Sexuality is basic to our sense of self—our understanding that we are God's creation. The secular world may see sex as a "thing" or an "activity," but a Christian sexual ethic views it as an integral part of life with God. Sexuality is essentially our way of living before God as male and female.

Building on that foundation, here are some additional thoughts to help us straighten out our view of sex and lower our propensity for sexual addictions:

1. *We must always aim at spiritual and psychological health.* We are called to renew our minds. But it is fruitless to attempt this renewing only from a human point of view. It is a product of the transformation God works in us (Rom 12:2).
2. *We must understand that God's creation is reflected within our bodies in sexual differences, and this is separate from the Fall.* Sex is not sin. It is how we express our sexuality that determines whether or not it is sinful. God created sex to be part of our lives (Gn 1:28). We should rejoice in it.
3. *We need to be on guard against distorting sex and turning it into a frenzied search for the "ultimate" pleasure.* Because it has been

contaminated by sin, sex has the potential to become distorted. In fact, because sex presents such compelling rewards, it has the greatest potential of all the human emotions to become distorted.

4. *We must strive for purity not because we feel guilty, but because following God's commands brings us closer to him.* François Mauriac once pointed out that most arguments for purity tend to be *negative arguments*: Be pure, or you will feel guilty.<sup>6</sup> But God commands purity for a *positive reason*: "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God" (Mt 5:8).

5. *We need total healing, not just healing of our sexual distortions.* Our sexual sins are just as much a reflection of our neuroticisms as they are a violation of God's laws. As such, they are impediments to our spiritual and emotional growth. We are the ones who suffer if we violate God's plan for our sexuality; we forfeit the growth of our character.

6. *We need to ensure that our repentance does not become a form of self-punishment.* God demands repentance as a condition of forgiveness; we tend to turn it into punishment. Herein lies a "catch-22" situation. If we use repentance for self-rejection and self-condemnation, we set up a barrier to God's forgiveness. Repentance is the doorway back to God, not a gauntlet of self-flagellation we must run in order to get back to God.

7. *We need to proclaim constantly that the power of God is greater than our sin and that his resources far exceed our most pitiful needs.* For many, these resources never get a chance because of the barriers I have been discussing. Preachers, teachers, and people-helpers need to apply greater wisdom to help people tap into these resources. Too often, I am sorry to say, the preaching I hear from our evangelical pulpits tends to set up barriers between people and God's resources, creating false guilt that resists grace—and this is especially true in the area of sexuality. Such preaching may help keep people dependent on the church, but it never turns them free.

## LUST AS AN ADDICTION

Lust is sometimes called an "animal urge." Actually, however, it's uniquely human; it has its origins in the distinctive way the human brain is organized. In lower forms of life, sex is purely an instinctual urge. It is triggered by odors and carried out by reflexes. I very much doubt if a male dog can tell if another dog is male or female simply from outward appearance. Differences are communicated through scent—often pungent to the species but imperceptible to others.

In human beings, however, these functions are "moved up" higher in the brain; this transfer is known as "encephalization of function." The human sexual drive operates out of the "cortex," that thin outer layer of the brain where all learning takes place. Humans use their highly developed brains to *learn* how, when, where, and whether they will give expression to their sexual urges.

We are, therefore, not as instinctually driven as animals when it comes to sex. This makes us responsible for what we do and gives us the power to make choices. In other words, we are *more* than our hormones. We even have the ability, should we so choose, to suppress our sexual urges through the control that the cortex of the brain allows us to exert. This makes celibacy possible.

The fact that our sex drive is controlled by our brains also means that we can take the basic hormonally determined sex drive and *add power* to it with fantasy, thoughts, and preferences. And the more we "enhance" sex in this way, the more addictive it can become.

It is this brainpower, with its fantastic ability to symbolize and create "substitutes" for different objects, that turns visual objects into sexual objects. Pictures, for instance, can become charged with sexual significance even though they are just printed dots on a sheet of paper. For males, the sight of female breasts takes on special significance that goes

beyond the breasts' created function to provide nurturing milk for babies (no other form of animal life regards the breasts as sexual symbols this way). Shapely legs or a particular waistline can also become symbolized and take on stimulating properties that get the sex hormones going. For the female, masculine builds or a particularly ruggedness might do the same—though women tend to respond to visual cues less than men do.

This "symbolizing" of certain body parts that turns them into sexual objects is the beginning of the fetish phenomenon seen in most perversions. Remember, a fetish is an object that becomes a substitute object of devotion. A sexual fetish is a sexual symbol that substitutes for the real thing. For instance, a shoe or a stocking can come to be sexually significant in its own right.

Now here is the rub: The more we conceal parts of the body, the more we tend to create these fetishes. This concealment is, to some extent, necessary in modern society. Nevertheless, it is out of this "covering" of the human body that originated in the Fall that much sexual addiction arises.

Once we have created sexual "symbols," they seem to be permanently embedded in our minds. Fortunately, in a healthy person the brain can learn to separate symbols and sort them out, to "decide" when it is appropriate to become stimulated. This explains why a male gynecologist can clinically examine female sexual organs all day long without any sexual reaction and yet gets aroused when he goes home and sees his wife's peekaboo blouse.

Lust, therefore, is much *more* than just an animal drive. No animal spends its life fixating on sex; its sexual drive lasts only as long as the scent is in the air. Human beings are different; a large part of our sexuality is in our minds. Sexual health and harmony don't come from nature, therefore, but from the responsible exercise of appropriate choices. On the negative side, sexual addiction involves the participating of