

Porneia in the Church

The Pathway to Freedom from Sexual Bondage is Identity Focused and Holistic

A Study of Ephesians 4:17-5:12 by Ted Shimer

In his letter to the Ephesian believers, the apostle Paul lays out solutions to finding freedom from sexual sin that are also the essentials to living out of a new identity in Christ. Paul's path to freedom from sexual bondage requires the pursuit of a new life, a new life in Christ.

Introduction

During the first century, Ephesus was a major commercial city and the Roman capital of the province of Asia. It was also the headquarters for the goddess Diana (or Artemis) and her temple, which was one of the wonders of the ancient world. Acts 19 describes the uproar in this pagan society when the new believers repented of their witchcraft and idol worship. Sexual immorality was also a major part of the Ephesian culture which can be seen with the Roman bathhouses or the legalized prostitution¹ that was a mainstay in the city. John McArthur says of Ephesus' moral reputation,

Some historians rank it as the most lascivious city of Asia Minor... The fifth-century B.C. Greek philosopher Heraclitus, himself a pagan, referred to Ephesus as "the darkness of vileness. The morals were lower than animals and the inhabitants of Ephesus were fit only to be drowned." There is no reason to believe that the situation had changed much by Paul's day. If anything, it may have been worse².

It's also important to note that within a few years after writing his letter to the Ephesians, Paul sent a second letter (1 Timothy) to Ephesus to instruct his protégé Timothy, who was overseeing the churches in Ephesus. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul instructs him on the issues to address among the Ephesian believers. The words or concepts of purity, sexual sin, godliness and holiness are mentioned 18 times in six short chapters. Ephesus was a very sexualized society and the need for godliness within the church was paramount to Paul. And so, addressing the sexualized culture impacting the believers is the focus for this section of Ephesians.

The gospel originally took root in Ephesus on Paul's third missionary journey. He spent two and half years teaching and establishing the new converts. It is believed that there were several house churches in Ephesus to whom Paul was writing.

The purpose of the book of Ephesians is identity formation - helping believers understand and live out their new identity in Christ. Salvation in Jesus Christ has given believers a radical new relationship with our heavenly Father. We are beloved children of God with a new worth, inheritance, and calling.

Book Overview

Before we look at the passage found in chapters 4 and 5, it would serve us well to be reminded of the key themes of this letter. It's hard to capture the essence of the book of Ephesians better than the title of Watchman Nee's famous sermon and book entitled **Sit Walk Stand**. These three words summarize the essence of this letter.

Sit

"the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory... raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come" (Ephesians 1:17-21)

"and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus... For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:6-9)

After the resurrection, God the Father placed Jesus at His right hand in the seat of honor, dominion, power and favor. And so those of us who are now "in Christ" because of our faith in Christ have also been seated with Jesus at the Father's right hand. Therefore, the Christian life does not begin by walking but it begins by sitting. Or as Nee put it, the Christian life does not begin with **do**, it begins with **done**.

Sit is an important word when we consider our salvation. It indicates that our efforts have no part in obtaining a position in heaven for eternity. Jesus Christ finished the work for which the Father had sent Him, and now we rest in the position He secured for us. We sit as the beloved of God, blessed with every spiritual blessing because of

what Jesus did. Our position of **sitting** reflects the faith we have in the work of Christ. This isn't a position we add to or a position we keep by our efforts, but we sit as the Savior sits in His completed work.

We only begin to grow in the Christian faith when we first learn to sit. And when we sit, we are putting our full weight onto something other than ourselves. We rest and relax in what someone else has built. So when we rest in Christ, our significance, our reputation, our worth, our lovability and our identity all depend on Him and His finished work on our behalf. We should no longer seek our own significance because now our ultimate significance is found in Christ. We no longer have to pursue approval from others because we now have the ultimate approval from our creator and judge in Christ. Seated is past tense. It is done. Not only is Jesus' justifying work done, but when we put our faith in Him then we are seated too. The redemptive work of salvation is complete.

Maturity in the Christian life requires growth in our understanding of the riches we now possess in Christ. The full grandeur of this amazing truth led Paul to pray that we would not only know it, but be able to fully comprehend it as well. He prayed,

“having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might” (Ephesians 1:18-19)

This new union with Christ is two-fold: We are “in Christ” and Christ is “in us”. Learning to sit in Christ will enable us to **walk** by His power. This is the second key theme we find in Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

Walk

Paul uses this concept of 'walk(ing)' eight times in Ephesians 4-6:9 to express how believers are to live out their new identity in the world.

“I therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called... you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do” (Ephesians 4:1,17).

Walking flows from our identification in Christ and should reflect the exalted position we now possess in Him. Our position is completely dependent on Christ's work, but our practice includes our grace inspired effort, in addition to the power He gives us through the Holy Spirit. In this section, Paul mentions the Holy Spirit twice,

"Do not grieve the Holy Spirit" (Ephesians 4:30)

"And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18)

This command to "be filled with the Spirit" is not a one-time event such as being indwelt and sealed by the Spirit at salvation (Eph. 1:13), but it literally means 'keep on being filled'. It points to a lifestyle of continual surrender to the Spirit's leading and power in our lives. Living the Christian life was never intended to be something that our best effort could achieve. Our best effort is not worthy of the calling. It is only when we surrender ourselves daily and allow Jesus to live His life through us by the power of the Holy Spirit that we can live in a manner worthy of our calling.

God does not fill what has not been emptied. Paul illustrates this thought in Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Notice how Paul mentions Jesus' love and sacrifice for him as he lives the crucified life. Paul's ability to live the crucified life flowed from sitting in the love of our crucified Savior.

The Apostle's charge to all believers that we no longer live like those in the world around us, but rather that we walk in a manner "worthy of our calling" must be a Spirit empowered endeavor. We need God's help to live the life He has called us to live. Therefore, Paul lets us know the supernatural means God has provided for us to sit and walk. The victory to sit has been won and the power to walk has been given, but the ability to fully live out of our union with Christ will be opposed. So now, Paul explains what God provides so we can stand in His truth.

Stand

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to **stand** against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to with**stand** in the evil day, and having done all, to **stand** firm” (Ephesians 6:10-13).

We have an enemy who desires to undermine and confuse the reality of our union with Christ, and he has devised schemes to do so. If he can keep us from sitting then he can hinder us in our walking. When the people of God do not comprehend their position in Christ and do not walk in a manner worthy of their calling, then God does not receive the glory He deserves. God has provided all we need to be more than conquerors in Christ so that we can Sit, Walk, and Stand for His glory.

Although a more extensive analysis of spiritual warfare is beyond the immediate scope of this study, I did want to briefly examine one key aspect that is important to our discussion as it relates to the roots of sexual bondage.

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 10:3-5 that “the weapons of our warfare are made powerful by God for tearing down strongholds, arguments, and obstacles raised up against the knowledge of God.” Spiritual battle for the believer is destroying lies with the truth. And truth plays a prominent role in the weaponry Paul describes in Ephesians chapter 6 verses 10-20:

- “the belt of truth”(v.14) on which so much of the rest of the armor depends.
- “shoes...gospel of peace”(v.15) which is the message of truth.
- “the shield of faith... you can extinguish the flaming darts of the evil one” we trust God and His word in the face of the lies and accusations of the enemy.
- “helmet of salvation” so we can understand the truth of all we have in Christ.
- “sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” is our offensive weapon to be used like Jesus did against the attacks, temptations and lies of the enemy.

If believers truly understood our position in Christ and who we are in Him, it could be revolutionary. This may be why Paul pauses twice in this letter to pray that the Ephesian believers would understand, comprehend and believe it. Remember that

our union with Christ involves two mysterious and all-important truths: We are “in Christ” and Christ is “in us”.

- “We are in Christ” involves sitting fully in your position in Him.
- “Christ in us” involves Jesus living His resurrected life through us by the power of His Holy Spirit.

Satan wants us to misunderstand, doubt, or have mere head knowledge about our union with Christ. Since he cannot prevent salvation from happening when we believe the gospel, his goal is to keep the effects of the gospel from being fully realized through his lies and accusations. Sexual immorality is a scheme of the devil that effectively obscures one’s sitting in Christ; and this, in turn, disrupts and derails us from walking in a manner worthy of God’s calling. If Satan can undermine our sitting, he can trip us up in our walking.

Paul exhorts believers to stand against the schemes of the Devil. This standing against the lies and attacks of the enemy are particularly important when we look at the last two roots of sexual bondage: trauma and shame. It is from these two roots that the enemy delivers his lies with powerful effect. Therefore, Paul reminds the Ephesians that they must sit in His position, walk in His power, and stand in His truth against the enemy’s attacks.

Overview of Ephesians 4:17-5:12

In the first three chapters of his letter, Paul describes the supernatural calling and blessings of believers in Christ. And now in chapter four he pivots to encourage those same Ephesian believers to walk in a way that reflects this exalted calling.

“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (4:1).

Closing the gap between their high calling and their daily lives is the vision Paul is seeking to cast for this young church. Therefore, he begins by exhorting these believers to live out that which is true of their new position in Christ.

In this portion of his letter (Ephesians 4:17-5:12), Paul points to the sin of immorality as a key area keeping the Ephesian believers from living up to their calling. He begins (4:17-20a) and ends (5:3-12) this section with commands regarding the fact

that believers (followers of Christ) should not be walking in the way of the Gentiles (the old life), specifically in the area of sexual immorality. In the middle section (4:20b-5:2) Paul further instructs them to now walk in the new way of Christ (the new life) and lay aside the old way of the Gentiles (the old life).

There is something particularly potent about sexual sin that keeps believers stuck in their old mindset, and holds them back from fully living out their new identity. Because the book of Ephesians is about identity formation, it makes sense that the Holy Spirit would lead Paul to address sexual immorality because it can powerfully undermine one's identity in Christ. It is a scheme of the devil.

Paul addresses the issue of sexual immorality as an opportunity to instruct the believers on how they should practically “put on” their new self in Christ. This path being laid out by Paul leads not only to freedom from sexual sin, but also to an even greater freedom in Christ. Freedom from sexual bondage does not just happen through behavior modification, but it requires the laying aside of the old life and the putting on the new. It is the adoption of a new mindset and a new lifestyle.

Apparently in the church at Ephesus, sexual purity was a major area in which some were not walking worthy of their calling. Paul says,

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity (Ephesians 4:17-19)

The phrase “you must no longer” suggests that this was a present issue instead of something only in the past. Paul commands the Ephesian believers to quit living like the lost people around them. Bad living always starts with bad thinking. The Gentiles were “futile of mind”, which in the Greek means devoid of truth. This is important to note because Paul is going to emphasize the urgent need for truth in this passage. Without truth, people live in the darkness. When believers do not live in light of the truth, their old ways of thinking can lead to old ways of living in sexual sin.

In verse 19, Paul describes the behavior of the Gentiles that some in the church were following. “They had given themselves up to sensuality” (literally unbridled lust) and they were “greedy to practice every kind of impurity”. If you wanted to describe sexual addiction, it would be hard to do any better than the CSB translation of this phrase: “gave themselves over to promiscuity for the practice of every kind of impurity with a desire for more and more.” Commentator Peter O’Brien says of this phrase, “Ultimately it becomes a vicious circle because new perversions must be sought to replace the old.”³ In this phrase, Paul gives us an amazingly accurate description of the nature of sex addiction.... one who can’t get enough of **every kind** of impurity. When an alcoholic or drug addict reaches a point of tolerance, he needs **more** of the substance to achieve the same high, but the one stuck in the sin of sex addiction does not only need more, he needs **different** (every **kind** of impurity). And the **different** they covet is typically more deviant, taboo, or extreme.

This is one reason why today’s pornography is so destructive. Before the internet, it would usually take time for someone to progress to “every kind of impurity”, but not today. A thirteen-year old with a smartphone can progress from “normal” porn to some of the most vile stuff imaginable within a three hour binge. Gender confusion and sexual perversion have exploded exponentially since internet pornography. The greedy pursuit of every kind of sexual impurity is the nature of sexual bondage. The shame of porn use for the Christian is not merely that they are looking at porn, but it’s **the kind of porn** they are looking at that multiplies the shame. And this shame is why so many Christians stay in the shadows instead of confessing and seeking help. The enemy keeps them stuck “in the way of the Gentiles.”

It’s important to note that the NIV translators may have made an interpretive error through the use of punctuation when they decided to set apart greediness from both sensuality and impurity. In the original Greek, greediness is connected to “every kind of impurity”. They are greedy for different kinds of impurity. This is important because this word “greed” or “covetous” is used again two more times (5:3,5) in conjunction with sexual immorality and impurity. If someone misreads it here, they will likely do the same in those verses as well. Commentator O’Brien describes sexual coveting as, “...the inward cravings...that insatiable desire to have more, even the coveting of someone’s else’s body for selfish gratification”.⁴ Recognizing, as O’Brien points out, that covetousness is used three times in this passage to describe an out-of-control sexual appetite is key to understanding this passage as a whole (4:17-5:12).

After describing the immoral lifestyle of the Gentiles in v.19, Paul says in the very next sentence, “But **you** did not learn Christ in this way.” Paul is reminding the Ephesian believers of their holy calling in Christ. What was it they learned? They were taught to “put off the old man and put on the new.” When the Ephesian believers initially trusted Christ for salvation under the apostle’s teaching, they laid aside their old manner of life and put on their new life in Christ. In Colossians 3:1-12, Paul makes clear that to “put on the new self” refers to both past salvation and the ongoing process of present sanctification. The Ephesians were called to continue replacing the old by putting on the new, so that they might walk in a manner worthy of their calling. This new path leads not only to a new life in Christ but also to freedom from sexual sin.

In verses 22-27, Paul gives instruction on how to walk in the way of Christ instead of the way of the Gentiles:

- put off the old self (v.22)
- be renewed in the spirit of your minds (v.23)
- put on the new self in... holiness (v.24)
- put away falsehood (v.25)
- speak the truth with his neighbor (v.25)
- be angry and do not sin, do not let the sun go down on your anger (v.27)

He now follows these commands with three examples contrasting the difference in living the old life versus the new.

- The old entitlement mentality of a thief, literally a taker, is contrasted with the new self of a giver who labors to share with the needy. (v. 28)
- The old self uses unwholesome words but the new self only builds others up with their words. (v.29)
- The old self is full of bitterness, anger, wrath and slander while the new self is kind and forgiving. They imitate God and walk in sacrificial love. (4:30-5:2)

And now in the final nine verses of this section (5:3-12), Paul returns to instructing the Ephesians about living lives of sexual purity in light of their new reality in Christ. Sexual sin is not who they are in Christ.

- But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you as is proper among saints (v.3)
- No filthiness or coarse joking ...which is out of place (not who you are) (v.4)
- No immoral or impure person has an inheritance in the Kingdom of Christ (v.5)
- Do not become partners with them (sexually immoral and impure)... you are light in the Lord (v.7-8)
- Walk as children of light... take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness...it is shameful to even speak of the things that they do in secret (v.8b-12).

In chapter 5 verse 3, Paul begins by repeating a similar description of the sexual sin he introduced earlier in 4:19. Remember there he described the way of the Gentiles that the Ephesians were following as “they have given themselves up to sensuality (unbridled lust)”, and “...greedy to practice every kind of impurity”. Paul replaces the word sensuality with **sexual immorality** when he states, “But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints” (v.3). This is the Greek word **porneia**, which means forbidden sexual intercourse involving adultery, fornication, homosexuality, bestiality, etc.

The Greek word for greediness (pleonexia) in v.19 is the same word translated covetousness in 5:3. Bible commentator Peter O'Brien believes that since Paul used this word in 4:19 to describe the greediness of an out-of-control sexual appetite, it is preferable to interpret it the same way in 5:3. A similar word is used again in 5:5. “For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.” The word used here, **pleonektes**, comes from the same root word in 4:19 (greedy) and 5:3 (covetousness). In all three of these passages, the idea of greed is used in the context of sexual impurity within the church (“they can’t get enough”). This is important because it captures not only the idea of the pursuit of sexual sin, but it also conveys the idea of sexual bondage which apparently some in the Ephesian church were struggling with. This out of control sexual appetite that Paul is addressing in the Ephesian church unfortunately describes the pornography addiction we see today in the lives of so many within the church.

In verse 5, Paul describes the person who is in the path of God’s wrath, and once again he calls believers off the path of the Gentiles. He says, “no immoral or impure

person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom.” Idolatry was no longer their identity. Some of the Ephesians were engaging in immorality and impurity, but that should not define them, because they were in Christ and worshiped the one true God. Paul seeks to remind them that the Gentiles are headed for eternal destruction, but this is not the same path for those who follow Christ. This is not their calling. The way of the Gentiles, the way of porneia is the path to hell. Paul now concludes this section by reminding the Ephesian believers that they are children of light and should take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness. This is not who they are in Christ. As he said in 5:3-4, this is not proper and is out of place for saints.

Paul's main objective in 4:17-5:12 seems to be outlining practical steps for the church on how to live out this new identity in Christ. And he seeks to accomplish this by exhorting the Ephesian believers to “no longer walk as the Gentiles walk”, which is tied to all kinds of sexual immorality. Sexual sin keeps believers stuck in the way of the Gentiles. This old way of living must be abandoned if we are to live in the fullness of our new identity in Christ.

Paul's Identity Driven Solutions for Sexual Bondage

Now we are going to take a closer look at how Paul's instructions to the Ephesian believers not only leads to living out one's identity in Christ, but also to freedom from sexual sin. Sex or porn addiction among believers today is at epidemic levels. If lasting freedom is to be achieved, then the roots of addiction must be addressed with effective solutions. Although Paul never mentions the phrase “roots of addiction”, the solutions he points to directly address each of them. Some of these roots have only been identified by man-made psychology in the last couple of decades, but yet the all-sufficient word of God has recorded these solutions for over 2000 years.

Addiction, bondage, habit, and besetting sin are words or phrases often used to describe a person struggling to break free from pornography. Some have an aversion to the word addiction because they fear it is an excuse for a person to avoid taking responsibility for their sin. Addiction should not be an excuse for sin, but rather it can help explain how otherwise godly people who love God and hate sin often do not find freedom without help. The addiction label does not diminish responsibility, but it can encourage the person who is stuck in the shadows to repent, come into the light, and get help. Understanding some of the addictive

dynamics can help give hope that freedom is possible. But if you don't like the word addiction, then use another word with which you are more comfortable. I have illustrated below how Paul's solutions found in the 4th chapter of Ephesians specifically address the 6 roots of addiction that must be confronted for one to find lasting freedom.

Six Roots in Ephesians 4:17-4:27

Root of Addiction	Solution
S exualized Society	Pursue Holiness "... put on the new self... in holiness." (v.24)
A ddicted Brain	Renew the Mind "... renewed in ... your minds ..." (v.23)
I solation	Develop Authentic Relationships "... speak the truth ... we are members of one another." (v.25)
N egative Emotions	Process Emotions "... do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger ..." (v.26)
T rauma	Replace Lies with Truth "... the truth is in Jesus ... put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor ..." (v.21, 25)
S hame	Live out of an Identity in Christ "... put on the new self, created after the likeness of God ..." (v.24)

Notice the acronym that the six roots spell out (SAINTS). This reminds us of Paul's approach for instructing believers to overcome sexual bondage. It is about living out of our new identity in Christ. When we apply this holistic approach, it not only results in genuine freedom, but it also results in believers living up to their full potential in

Christ. The enemy wants believers to stay stuck in their old life, but God desires to free us from bondage by unleashing the power of the cross in our lives. Paul did not shy away from addressing the topic of porneia in the church, because for him it was an opportunity for deep discipleship. It can be for us as well. As we look at the solutions Paul offers, we should see them not merely as addressing a root of a porn addiction but also as a practical way to put on the new self.

Sexualized Society → Put on... Holiness

“put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:24).

When a person places their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation, they are declared holy and righteous before God. The righteousness of Christ has been credited to their spiritual account. When believers “put on the new self”, they clothe themselves with that perfect holiness and righteousness from God.

To “put on the new self” not only refers back to conversion, but as Peter O'Brien states in his commentary on Ephesians, “it has the force of an imperative” now⁵. Believers in Christ need to continue to “put on the new self”... in holiness, which involves the laying aside of an old life (v.22). But putting off the old self and putting on the new is not simply behavior modification. As believers we must first come to know and acknowledge our new spiritual identity, and then seek to daily manifest this identity through a changed lifestyle. At the core of this calling is for one to “deny yourself and take up your cross daily and follow Me” (Luke 9:23). This is the abandonment of an old life and the adoption of a new one.

The analogy Paul is using here is that of taking off old clothes and putting on new ones. To walk in a manner worthy of our calling means that there are certain things we must remove from our lives as believers and other things we must embrace and begin to implement.

Commands related to putting off the old life:

- No longer walk as the Gentiles walk (v.17)
- Lay aside old self (v.22)
- Lay aside falsehood (v.25)
- Be angry and yet do not sin, don't let the sun go down on your anger (v.26)

- Steal no longer (v.28)
- Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth (v.29)
- Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander and malice be put away from you (v.31)
- There must not be a hint of sexual immorality (5:3)
- There must be no filthiness, silly talk or coarse joking (5:4)
- Have nothing to do with fruitless deeds of darkness (5:11)

Commands related to putting on the new life:

- Be renewed in the spirit of your mind v.23)
- Put on new self (v.24)
- Speak the truth to your neighbor (v.25)
- Labor to share with the needy (v.28)
- Speak only what is edifying (v.29)
- Don't grieve the Holy Spirit (v.30)
- Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other (v.32)
- Be imitators of God and walk in love (5:1-2)
- Give thanks (contrasted with filthy speech) (5:4)
- Walk as children of light (5:8)

This list applies first to following Jesus and embracing the new life we have in Him, but it also applies to overcoming a porn or sex addiction. Freedom will only happen when there is the abandonment of a current lifestyle and the adoption of a new one.

Pursuing holiness involves putting off certain things that are harmful and putting on other things that are beneficial. When we “put on our new self... in holiness” we are seeking to live out in **practice** what is true of our **position** in Christ. Holiness is who we are in Christ, and we should live in a manner worthy of that calling.

In v.24 we are told to put on **God's** holiness, not the best holiness we can muster. This means that we must first receive God's holiness found in Christ and then adopt His standards for living. To be holy is to be separate and set apart to the Lord from that which is unholy. For the person in sexual bondage this includes identifying and removing triggers and temptations with the resolve Jesus describes in Matthew 5:29-30,

If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

Jesus gave this radical command immediately following his warning about visual lust in 5:27-28. If something triggers us to sin, we should remove it. What are the triggers or temptations that turn your thoughts sexual? Remove them or remove yourself from the situations that lead to them. Does the media I consume feed the flesh or the spirit? When I put on the new self, I adopt God's standards for what I put in my mind. What kind of life transformation is possible if His standards became our standards?

"Take **every** thought captive to the obedience of Christ" 2 Cor. 10:5

"Get rid of **all** moral filth" James 1:21-22

"Purify yourselves from **everything** that contaminates body and spirit" 2 Cor. 7:1

"Be holy yourselves in **all** your behavior" 1 Peter 1:15

"Make **no** provision for the flesh in regard to **its** lusts." Romans 13:14

Notice the all-inclusive words **emphasized** that show the scope of God's holiness. The pursuit of holiness in the context of finding freedom from sexual sin involves putting off and putting on.

Put off the sexual sin of the old self:

- Delete and block certain numbers on your phone.
- Don't isolate when tempted.
- Avoid sexualized media.
- Block access to sexualized media (use resources like [**Covenant Eyes**](#)).
- Identify your triggers and establish boundaries for them.
- Don't feed the flesh in your mind or with your eyes.

Put on holiness related to sexual sin and porn:

- Put [**accountability software**](#) on **all** your devices.
- [**Lock up your smartphone**](#).
- Identify triggers and corresponding boundaries to help you avoid them.
- Daily time in prayer and scripture.

- Adopt healthy habits (ie. sleeping, eating and exercising).
- Get regular accountability and fellowship.

If people do not grow in their conviction for holiness, then the tendency will be to conform to the sexualized society. Left to ourselves, we tend to drift. Theologian D.A. Carson writes:

People do not drift toward holiness. Apart from grace-driven effort, people do not gravitate toward godliness, prayer, and obedience to scripture, faith, and delight in the Lord. We drift toward compromise and call it tolerance; we drift toward disobedience and call it freedom; we drift toward superstition and call it faith; we cherish the indiscipline of lost self-control and call it relaxation; we slouch toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking we have escaped legalism; we slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated.⁶

Believers in Christ are given a vision for holiness in the word of God. Holiness is the path to the abundant life Christ promises. To pursue holiness is to pursue freedom and God's best for our life. Putting off the old self and putting on the new self is making the pursuit of holiness practical in our daily lives.

Addicted Brain → Be Renewed in... Your Minds

“be renewed in the spirit of your minds” (Ephesians 4:23).

When Paul commanded the Ephesians to “no longer walk as the Gentiles walk” (4:17), he began by pointing out the faulty thinking of the Gentiles. He described them as being futile in their minds (meaning devoid of truth), darkened in their understanding, and ignorant due to the hardness of their hearts (inability to receive truth). When believers are not abiding in Christ and His word, we are susceptible to a similar mindset and hardening, which can come about through sin's deception (Hebrews 3:13). Before we begin to walk like the Gentiles, we begin to think like them.

When a follower of Christ gets hooked on pornography they begin thinking and living like a Gentile. Instead of living in holiness, they begin living according to the lust of their flesh (1 Peter 1:13-17). How can we think and watch certain things and

yet not be reminded of the reality that “our secret sins” are in the light of God’s presence (Psalm 90:8)? In these moments, instead of living in the fear of the Lord, we are living in ignorance, devoid of truth, and our understanding is darkened. We are thinking like the Gentiles.

To think and walk like a Gentile requires no special effort, for it is the natural progression of our “old manner of life” (v.22) and is “according to the course of this world” (Eph. 2:2). But to walk in our new life, as children of light, requires effort and focus. Paul reminded the Ephesian believers that they had heard and learned about Christ (v.20-21), been taught in Him (v. 21), and were learning what is pleasing to Him (v.5:10). This hearing and learning about Christ is not a one-time event, but rather a lifestyle of meditating on and applying His truth to transform our thinking and behavior.

Because it can take time to transform one’s thinking, our Freedom Fight program incorporates a short Bible study to reinforce each lesson with the word of God. Thinking God’s thoughts is essential to living the fullness of the new life. The transformation from the old life of worldly thinking to the new life in Christ requires a continued renewing of the mind (Romans 12:2).

As we saw in the last section on holiness, renewing the mind also includes no longer feeding the mind worldly thoughts. When we are not renewing our mind with God’s truth, we can get stuck in old worldly thinking and in our old life. Renewing the mind is that part of the process where we put off the old thinking and put on the new thinking that comes from the new life in Christ.

Recent discoveries in brain science have helped us further understand what is involved when one renews their mind with God’s truth. When you think a thought or engage in a behavior (good or bad), your brain forms neurological connections that make that thought or action easier to do again. The thoughts and behaviors that form the strongest neural pathways become the ones that are repeated most often. Therefore the mind must be renewed regularly with God’s truth so that Christ’s thinking becomes the dominant pathway for us.

Building New Pathways

“But you did not learn Christ in this way” (4:20). The Greek word used here for ‘learn’ means to learn by use and practice. Learning Christ means being a disciple of Christ. He is the Master Teacher and we are the students. We do not seek to gain knowledge for knowledge's sake, but rather we do so with the mindset that this learning will teach us how to practice His ways. This takes repetition. Imagine the change in thinking that must happen for a thief's mindset to be transformed. “He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have **something** to share with one who has need” (Ephesians 4:28). For someone to go from entitled thinking and being a taker (literally), to someone now focused on generously serving others is true transformation.

Entitlement thinking is one of those lies that can feed sexual sin leading to a porn or sex addiction. It says some form of, “I deserve this!” And if this entitlement thinking is not renewed by the truth, then it becomes much more challenging for someone to walk in lasting freedom. The entitlement lie is always present to help one deny, minimize and rationalize their sin.

Putting on a new life starts by thinking new thoughts. When the truth of God replaces worldly thinking and lies are replaced, our minds are renewed and we are transformed. Here are some other examples from this passage where the mind needs to be renewed:

- Put away falsehood and speak truth to his neighbor (4:25).
- Choose edifying speech over unwholesome talk (4:29).
- Forgiveness instead wrath and revenge (4:31-32).
- Sexual sin isn't proper even to be named among saints (5:3).
- We shouldn't cheapen sex with crude jokes but we should be thankful for it (5:4).

Renewing the mind is essential to overcoming an addicted brain and building new neurological pathways. When a behavior is repeated, brain neurons connect to form pathways allowing messages to travel more efficiently. The more we travel those pathways, the easier it becomes to repeat in the future. This is why habitual behavior like riding bikes and tying shoes eventually become second nature.

Habitual behavior means that you don't really have to think about it anymore. And this allows the brain to operate more efficiently. Sexual sin that has been repeated for years can create strong neurological pathways in the brain. And when porn is used as a way to medicate the pain and discomforts of our life, those neurological pathways become even stronger.

If someone wants to stop a porn habit, they will quickly learn that it is not enough to try and simply avoid or resist traveling down the old pathway. The old pathway must be replaced with a new pathway. This is how lasting change happens. Repetition gets a person into the addiction, and repetition of a new pathway will help get them out. The porn pathways are examples of the kind of futile thinking that is darkened, and to overcome them the lies they represent must be replaced with truth. In our Freedom Fight program, we teach a simple tool called BRACE that is grounded in both scientific and biblical principles. When utilized effectively at the point of temptation, it can help someone turn from an old established pattern of sin and begin to create and establish new pathways of freedom in their mind.

We do not have the time here to fully unpack this tool, but I wanted to offer a quick overview. At the moment someone is tempted, BRACE can help them build a new pathway in response to a trigger. Compare the old pathway of porn with the new pathway of BRACE:

Old Porn Pathway	New BRACE Pathway
A Distracted mind	A Focused mind
Repress the truth	Remember the truth
Rely on your own strength	Ask God for help
Seek isolation	Call to break isolation
Stay in tempting situation	Escape tempting situation

Repetition gets people into addictive behavior and repetition can help get them out. God wants to renew our thinking, because when God changes our thinking, He changes us. The more we have learned about brain science in the last couple of decades, the more we realize how much it aligns with what the Bible has always said about the mind. Romans 12:2 informs us that the renewing of the mind is how transformation takes place. Renewing the mind related to finding freedom from sexual bondage involves:

- Regularly washing our minds with God's word.
- Meditating on certain truths and promises that shape our identity in Him.
- Replacing lies with God's truth when we identify a lie we have believed.
- Building new pathways with BRACE.

Isolation → Develop Authentic Relationships

“... speak the truth ... we are members of one another.” (v.25)

Addiction experts tell us, “The opposite of addiction isn’t sobriety, its connection.” This is especially true for someone with a porn or sex addiction which is classified as an intimacy disorder. Those who are less connected in healthy relationships are more susceptible to the fake intimacy of porn. When believers engage in porn, the shame often leads to more isolation.

After Adam and Eve sinned, they hid from God and from one another by covering themselves. Sin causes us to cover up from one another, and not just physically, but also emotionally. We hide who we really are. God called Adam and Eve out of hiding and He does the same to us. He wants us to leave the shadows so we can be in an authentic relationship with Him and others. Leaving the shadows of isolation for genuine community is essential for believers to find freedom from sexual sin and to fully live out our identity in Christ.

The most effective addiction recovery programs integrate small groups as a key component of their treatment. Small groups are so effective because they foster vulnerability and relational connection. Those who have authentic relational connections will experience more growth and abundance in Christ and more freedom from addiction.

Check out Paul's instructions related to either fostering or restoring authentic relationships. Think about the profound impact these would have on any relationship:

- Lay aside falsehood, speak the truth (4:25)
- We are members of one another (4:25)
- Be angry and yet do not sin, don't let the sun go down on your anger (4:26)
- Steal no longer but work and share with the needy (4:28)
- Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth but only words that build others up (4:29)
- Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander and malice be put away from you (4:31)
- Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other (4:32)
- Be imitators of God and walk in love (5:1-2)
- Give thanks (contrasted with filthy speech) (5:5)
- Walk as Children of light (5:8)

We were created for being in relationship with God and others. When a relationship is healthy it brings vitality to many other areas of life, but when a relationship is unhealthy, it can bring brokenness. Addictions are primarily about how someone has learned to cope with the pain and discomforts of life. And relational dysfunction is often the major source of pain that people feel compelled to medicate. This is why in Alcoholics Anonymous, the most widely used addiction recovery program, two of their twelve steps deal with relationships. And the whole program itself is designed to be processed within relationships. All truth is God's truth. Well before AA, the apostle Paul emphasized to the believers in Ephesus their need for authentic relationships in the context of finding freedom from sexual bondage.

I want to highlight a few of Paul's instructions that have important application related to a porn or sex addiction.

“Lay aside falsehood, speak the truth.”

The temptation for a Christian who struggles with pornography to lie and share half-truths is strong. A commitment not to lie and speak the truth is essential to recovery. In our program, each week everyone in the group answers the question: Did you lie directly or indirectly to anyone this week? In order for there to be genuine community and growth there must be honesty and openness about our sin. James

5:16 says, “Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed”. Getting real about our sin is where healing begins. Walking in the light involves being honest about my sin and those areas I am tempted to hide.

“We are members of one another.”

Like members of the human body that take care of one another, there should be a commitment of togetherness. It is not just about being in a group that truly matters, but rather the individuals of that group being committed to one another. Those who struggle with an addiction can become very inward-focused, so learning to become others-centered is an important part of their growth and recovery. This radical switch in mindset to go from a consumer to a giver is essential. We see an example of this change illustrated in 4:28: “Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.” Instead of coming to the group as a consumer with an entitlement mentality, we must learn to become givers and build others up (v.29). When this happens, it not only strengthens the person they help but it blesses the giver and makes the whole group better.

“Let all bitterness, wrath, anger be put away. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, as God in Christ forgave you.”

Instead of moving away from people by isolating or building walls with bitterness, anger and slander, we are commanded to forgive others like God forgave us in Christ (v.32). So much of the negative emotions people feel compelled to medicate are related to a lack of relational harmony. Few things can bring angst and anxiety like bitterness and unforgiveness. If a person trapped in sexual addiction does not learn how to release people and extend the forgiveness of Christ to others, the resulting angst will often lead them to medicate their emotions with pornography. Maintaining relational harmony was such a priority to Jesus that He commanded we resolve relational issues before we worship (Matthew 5:24). And He added that if we don't forgive others, then our heavenly Father won't forgive us. Unresolved conflict leads to isolation not only with others but also with God.

Isolation keeps a person stuck in their old life, but having authentic relationships with a community of other believers is essential for breaking free from a porn or sex addiction. Living the new life in Christ should result in being a blessing to others, a giver, an edifier, a forgiver, a lover of people, honest and committed to others. And

engaging in these activities produces authentic relationships which are essential to addressing the root of isolation.

Growing in true intimacy will help a person outgrow the fake intimacy of porn. To outgrow porn, a person must deepen their relationships with God and others. “The opposite of addiction isn’t sobriety, it’s connection.”

Negative Emotions → Process Emotions

Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity. (v.26-27)

Paul’s command in these verses is meant to encourage a person to deal with their anger so they do not take it into the next day. Negative emotions, like anger, can keep believers stuck in their old life. When we react in anger it can lead to sin. After Paul instructs “do not let the sun go down on your anger” and “do not give the devil an opportunity” he commands:

- Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth. (v.29)
- Put away bitterness. (v.31)

Not being able to correctly handle our anger can cause someone to sin with their language and lead to bitterness and unforgiveness. Paul instructs the Ephesians to deal with their anger sooner rather than later so it doesn’t lead to sin. Though this example is specifically about anger, there is an important principle here that applies to any negative emotion. We must process our emotions instead of ignoring, stuffing, or medicating them. Unprocessed negative emotions, like anger, make us more vulnerable to the enemy’s attacks.

Negative emotions are similar to the check engine light in a car that informs the driver when something needs attention. Ignoring the check engine light will most likely lead to bigger issues later. Left unchecked, these negative feelings can “give the devil an opportunity” by leading us to medicate our emotions instead of processing them with the Lord and others.

Negative emotions are a significant root of porn addiction that must be addressed for freedom to be realized. Outgrowing porn involves growing in self-awareness and learning to process feelings instead of medicating them. Acting out gives a person

the jolt of dopamine they crave. Pornography provides a powerful, albeit temporary, solution that takes away the discomfort.

The principles related to anger in Ephesians apply to other negative emotions. Negative feelings must be addressed and that is especially true when talking about breaking free from a porn addiction. Here are some of the instructions God gives in His word about negative emotions and how to handle them.

- Do not be anxious... (3 times) (Matthew 6:25,31,34)
- Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer...make your request known to God... (Phil. 4:6)
- Do not fear for I am with you, do not anxiously look about you... (Isaiah 41:10)
- Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?
Put your hope in God... (Psalm 42:5)
- there is no one at my right hand; no one is concerned for me. I have no refuge;
no one cares for my life. (Psalm 142:4)

One way to walk in the light involves being honest about our emotions and processing them with God and others. When we do not appropriately process our negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, depression and loneliness, they can open the door for the enemy. One opportunity afforded the devil is when people learn coping mechanisms for these emotions. Addiction experts tell us when someone starts using the high from their substance (ie. porn) to medicate negative emotions, that is when the addiction hooks the person at a deeper level. We have probably all experienced eating too much food in an effort to cope with negative emotions (ie. stress, anxiety, loneliness, etc.). Negative emotions must be processed with God and others so that they do not lead us into sin when making an effort to medicate them.

The brain doesn't just release dopamine when we experience pleasure, but it also releases dopamine in the anticipation of pleasure. If someone is using porn to relieve stress, then stress becomes the trigger that starts the craving to move down the porn pathway. The brain goes into relief mode and it moves the person by releasing dopamine to initiate the craving. A lot of men have told me that a huge urge to use porn will hit them out of nowhere, but when we go back and talk through what happened, it's typically an emotional trigger that ignited a desire to go down the porn pathway. The more that neurological pathway is traveled, the stronger the

trigger gets and the more difficult it becomes to resist. This is one of the ways the devil can take advantage of unprocessed anger or other negative emotions.

King David, who wrote many of the Psalms, regularly processed his emotions with God. In one such instance while dealing with anxiety, he wrote, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way” (Psalm 139:23-24, NASB). David was confused about the source of his anxiety, so he asked God to show him if it was connected to a deeper root. He invited God into his negative emotions to help sort them out, and in doing so, he showed us the steps needed to process emotions.

1. Identify the Emotion.

The first step a person should take in processing emotions is to identify the emotion. In the above example from the Psalms, David identified his negative feeling as anxiety. The acronym BLASSTED can be very helpful in this regard. Each letter represents a common negative feeling that triggers people to reach for their drug of choice. Those negative emotions are: **B**ored, **L**onely, **A**nxious, **S**tressed, **S**elf-doubting, **T**icked-off, **E**xhausted, and **D**epressed. When people use BLASSTED to regularly evaluate their emotions, it can help them start identifying their feelings more easily. Once their emotions are identified, people can take the next step.

2. Determine the Source of the Emotion.

When David was not clear about the source of his emotions, he asked for help. He asked God to help him determine if his anxiety was connected to something harmful within him. He prayed, “See if there is any hurtful way in me” (Psalm 139:23). We can do the same. Sometimes negative feelings are connected to deeper issues that may lead to hurtful ways in us. Our fear, depression, or anxiety might be related to identity struggles, shame issues, or trauma. When someone medicates their pain instead of examining the root cause of the negative feelings, they don’t address the real issues. In this way, they trust their own coping mechanisms instead of trusting God for deeper healing.

3. Cast Your Cares on the Lord.

We are not meant to handle our pain alone. God invites us to come to Him with our cares, burdens, and issues. Psalm 55:22 says, “Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you.” We are commanded to cast, not carry, our cares. When we do this, God promises to sustain us. What could keep us from casting our cares on the Lord? Pride seems to be a major issue. Peter quotes the command to “cast your cares” on the Lord immediately after his exhortation to “humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time” (1 Peter 5:6). It’s the prideful person who medicates his emotions instead of humbling himself and casting his worries on the Lord. God desires to carry our burdens.

Most people have no idea how negative emotions can drive other sinful behaviors in their life including addictive behaviors like porn use. Proverbs 14:8 says, “The wise man gives thought to his ways”. It is the wise person who seeks to understand why they behave and respond in certain ways. Growth in emotional awareness is essential to gaining wisdom. This is why we have developed a daily check-in for our program. It allows people to consider their ways and process any negative thoughts and emotions with accountability. It has proven to be one practical way for us to love God with all our heart (emotions) by processing our emotions and seeking to manage them in a way honoring to Him.

Trauma → Replace Lies with Truth

“... the truth is in Jesus ... put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor ...” (v.21, 25)

When a person understands how they use porn to medicate their negative emotions it can propel their progress toward freedom. They begin to identify and process their emotions instead of being triggered by them. Part of processing negative emotions involves understanding where they come from. For many, a major source of negative emotions in their life is trauma. Trauma is a deeply distressing or disturbing experience. It is typically an event, but it can also result from a dysfunctional environment. Research shows that the people most likely to struggle with addictions are those who have had significant trauma in their life. The addiction has become a way to cope.

But it's not the pain from the trauma that causes the biggest problems. Lies that a person internalizes as a result of the trauma can have a much deeper and longer lasting impact. Renowned psychotherapist and Harvard professor Elvin Semrad declared, "The greatest source of a person's suffering are the lies they tell themselves."⁷ This insightful observation is also a biblical truth related to spiritual warfare. Lies implanted by trauma can be another manifestation of the enemy's attacks against the believer. As we have previously discussed, one of Satan's key objectives is to establish strongholds in a person's mind through lies.

The apostle Paul wrote:

For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ. (2 Corinthians 10:3-5)

When lies are not taken captive to obey Christ, they become strongholds. A stronghold is a deeply held false belief. Strongholds can shape a person's perspective of how they see themselves, God, and their life in general. So as a result of trauma, abuse, or dysfunction, a person can begin believing certain lies like:

- I'm a failure.
- I'm unlovable.
- The abuse is my fault.
- There is something wrong with me.
- I deserve to be addicted.

For the child of God, these lies attack the very identity we possess in Christ, and believing these lies can lead to many negative emotions that one medicates with porn. Standing against these attacks is not only essential for believers in overcoming a porn addiction, but also in living out one's identity in Christ. So whether it's the trauma of abuse or neglect, these lies or false messages that become strongholds in our lives must be replaced with the truth for freedom to take place.

It is the truth that will set you free. This is clearly one of Paul's main focuses in Ephesians 4:17-5:12. Though Paul does not mention trauma, his focus on truth is the pathway to freedom for those impacted by the lies embedded from trauma. Lies keep us stuck, but truth can set us free to live the new in Christ. Paul reminds us that

staying stuck in the old manner of life is characterized by deception, falsehood, and darkness, while putting on the new self is characterized by walking in the light of the truth.

Staying Stuck in the Old

Let No One Deceive You (5:6)
Corrupted... With... Deceit (4:22)
Put Away Falsehood (4:25)
Unfruitful Works of Darkness (5:11)

vs. Putting on the New

vs. Truth is in Jesus (4:21)
vs. Created in... Holiness of Truth (4:24)
vs. Speak Truth to His Neighbor (4:25)
vs. Children of Light... Right and True (5:8-9)

When a person starts to walk in the light and replaces lies with the truth, the effects of trauma can begin to be overcome. But some trauma may require more intense focus and professional help.

There are other consequences of trauma beyond the lies that can also impact a person. Anger, bitterness, slander, and revenge, may be natural reactions one may have if they have been deeply hurt, abused, or wounded in some way.

When someone holds onto unforgiveness, the bitterness that follows can be toxic. Relational discord or bitterness can feed the negative emotions a porn addict feels compelled to medicate. Here are some of the instructions Paul gives to forgive and restore relational harmony:

- Be angry and yet do not sin, don't let the sun go down on your anger. Don't give the devil an opportunity (4:26-27).
- Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander and malice be put away from you (4:31).
- Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other as God in Christ has forgiven you (4:32).
- Be imitators of God and walk in love (5:1-2).

For the person impacted by trauma, it is often the bitterness of unforgiveness that can give the devil an opportunity to establish a stronghold in their life. Learning to forgive and be gracious as God forgave us in Christ is a must. We need God's supernatural power to forgive, which is why Paul commands us to "not grieve the Holy Spirit." The Spirit is the one who will empower us to forgive, so we must not resist His leadership. When we grieve Him, we stay stuck in the old manner of life. Forgiving a person does not indicate we have no boundaries in which to protect

ourselves, but it does mean we no longer hold something against another in the same way that God has released us from our sin.

When the lies from trauma are replaced with truth, they lose their power. Jesus proclaimed the liberating power of truth when he said, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (John 8:31-32). People regularly claim this promise of freedom but they tend to ignore the condition of abiding in God’s word. When we abide in His word and His word abides in us (John 15:7), we recognize lies and we replace them with the truth. To replace a lie, the lie must first be identified. And lies are much easier to spot when we know the truth. God’s truth cannot be unleashed in our lives to liberate us from lies and lead us into freedom if we are not regularly in God’s word. When we know the truth, then the truth will set us free.

But even when we know His truth it can sometimes be difficult to believe. And one of the big reasons is the final and most extensive root of addiction, which is shame.

Shame → Live out of an Identity in Christ

**“... put off your old self... put on the new self, created after the likeness of God ...”
(v.22-24)**

Shame is a devastating spiritual attack that keeps a person from understanding, believing, and living in the light of the truths of the gospel. Shame keeps us from sitting in who we are in Christ. It is different from guilt. Guilt says, “I’ve done bad,” but shame says, “I am bad.” At the core of shame is self-loathing and a sense of worthlessness. A person’s shame declares some version of **“I am not enough...there is something wrong with me...I am bad...or I don’t matter.”**⁸ Shame researcher Brené Brown defines shame as “an intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging.”⁹ Shame is most like the biblical concept of self-condemnation, which has no place in the mind of the believer. Paul reminds us in Romans 8:1, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”.

Shame is present with any addiction, but especially in the life of the Christian who struggles with a porn or sex addiction. Many followers of Christ who struggle with porn live with a deep sense of worthlessness. In a recent survey, 89% of Christian

college students who watched porn last year stated they felt self-hatred due to their use of porn.¹⁰ When someone hates themselves, it is easy for them to assume God feels the same way, and it is hard for them to receive love from God or others.

Shame is a major barrier when it comes to God's people truly embracing their identity as beloved children of God. The shame-filled Christian understands God's love intellectually, but may not truly believe it, and they may often feel emotionally numb to the love and acceptance of God. When people only possess head knowledge regarding God's love, it is difficult for them to build their identity around this truth.

The truth about our identity in Christ is deep. When Paul was explaining it in the book of Ephesians, he prayed that believers would be enlightened to grasp "the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints and the... immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe" (Eph. 1:16-23). In Eph.3:16-19 he also prayed that they "may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge".

If grasping the depth of our position in Christ is that important, it makes sense that our enemy would attack this truth and our ability to internalize it. This is why I am convinced that shame is one of the enemy's most potent attacks.

Remember that when Paul commanded the Ephesian believers to no longer walk like the Gentiles, he began by addressing how the Gentiles think. Shame-filled living starts with shame-filled thinking. And shame-filled thinking will keep one stuck in their old life.

"you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do in the...

- ... futility of their minds (v.17)

- ... darkened in their understanding (v.18)

- ... alienated from the life of God because of ignorance... due to their hardness of heart (v.18)

The Gentile mindset is futile (devoid of truth), darkened, and ignorant when it comes to the truth. When a person walks in the way of the Gentiles, they are more

susceptible to the lies of the enemy. This mentality makes it more difficult to receive truth and makes believers more susceptible to the lies of shame.

The Gentile mind is alienated from the life of God. Think about that. When a believer is walking and thinking “in the way of the Gentiles”, they are no longer experiencing the full spiritual blessings of their union with Christ. Shame makes it almost impossible to sit in their position in Christ.

Shame alienates believers from the life of God they have been given in Christ. They are not excluded from the life of God, but the self-hatred of shame can exclude them from **experiencing** the love of God. Instead of living out of the exalted position of a beloved child of God, they are stuck in shame. Paul describes the attack of the enemy in Ephesians 6:16 when he writes, “In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one”. Shame is a potent flaming dart of the evil one. When the accusations of shame are upon us, we must determine to trust God’s word instead of our feelings. This shield of faith is effective in stopping the enemy’s lie:

Shame Attack

I’m worthless
God is done with you
I am disgusting
I will never be free

Shield of Faith

I am beloved of God (Col. 3:12)
I am adopted into God’s family (Eph. 1:5)
I am a saint (Eph.1:1)
I am free; the power of sin is broken (Rom. 6:10-11)

Standing on the truth of our identity in Christ is essential to overcoming shame. Satan’s primary weapon against us is deception. One of the lies he constantly tells us is that we will never have victory. But the victory has already been won! We must believe it and stand in it. Verses like Romans 6:10-11, among others, teach us that believers are, “dead to sin but alive to God”. Thank God for the fact that the power of sin has been broken. We should continually ask for the faith to believe and stand in it. One way for us to hold the shield of faith and extinguish the arrows of the enemy is by renewing our minds with the truth so that when tempted we can stand. Claim Jesus’ victory and rest in it.

Shame experts tell us that the way shame is defeated is for a person to be vulnerable and embrace a sense of worthiness. Amazingly, in this passage the apostle Paul addresses living both vulnerably and living in Christ's worthiness. The more we learn in research and science the more it catches up with what the Scriptures have been saying. Here are Paul's instructions ...

Vulnerability:

- Put away falsehood (4:25)
- Speak truth with his neighbor (4:25)
- Walk as children of light (5:9)

When someone is stuck in shame, they deny, minimize, and rationalize their sin. They hide who they really are. But Paul's instructions call them into the light and into vulnerability and fellowship. This is why small groups are such a key part of any addiction recovery program. A small group is where a person can be known and accepted by others. Receiving love and acceptance from others helps a person receive God's love; and being vulnerable with others is how one can come to gain a greater understanding of God's unconditional love. Small groups create an environment where vulnerability thrives and shame loses its power. Shame thrives when hidden in the dark, but is defeated when brought into the light.

As followers of Christ, we have the incredible privilege of knowing that the worthiness of Christ has been credited to us. We have been seated with Him in a place of privilege next to the Father. As we have discussed earlier, the primary message of the book of Ephesian is to **Sit, Walk, and Stand** in our union with Christ but the condemnation of shame makes the reality of our worthiness more difficult to believe and internalize. Thankfully the apostle Paul gets more practical in this section regarding how we can live in the truth of our worthiness in Christ:

Worthiness:

- Put off your old self (v.22)
- Be renewed in the spirit of your minds (v.22)
- Put on the new self (v.24)

Notice the difference in self. Put off 'your' old self but put on 'the' new self. The new self is not the best version of yourself but it is the life and worthiness of Christ. It is His life through us. One practical way to put off the old self is to take thoughts

captive that reinforce a shame identity. This often happens through negative self-talk.

Putting off your old self involves not seeking your own worthiness or the approval of others. Our worthiness is not something we achieve but something we receive in Christ. We must learn to rest in His worthiness and not pursue our own. These are the truths we must dwell upon in order to renew our minds. These are the truths we must “speak to one another”. How do we put off the old? “Put away falsehoods” that contradict the truths of Christ and put off that which “corrupts through deceitful desires”. Putting on the new self includes receiving His worthiness and walking in it by faith. These are practical steps we can take to “put on the new self” in Christ.

When our worthiness rests in Christ and in His work, it frees us up to be more vulnerable with God and others. And vulnerability defeats shame. Shame leads to hiding, isolation and lying; and this mentality of shame can keep us stuck, not just in porn but in our old life.

Sexual sin is uniquely potent in keeping a child of God stuck in their old life and holding them back from living a full life in Christ. This is one reason I believe that in Ephesians, a letter about identity formation, God addresses the sin of immorality (porneia) in the church with timeless principles that lead to freedom and a deeper experience of the new life in Christ. Sexual sin, like pornography, in the Church is not just a problem to address but it is spiritual warfare keeping believers stuck in their old life. Addressing this issue is an opportunity for deep discipleship. A person does not just quit a porn habit, but they must outgrow it by following the practical steps Paul summarizes in this letter. For those who want to sit in their position in Christ and walk in a manner worthy of their calling, they must be ready to stand firm against the enemy’s attacks that undermine our position in Christ.

The Freedom Fight’s free online porn addiction recovery program systematically walks through the solutions that the apostle Paul outlines in Ephesians 4. And when one is committed to this path it does not simply lead to freedom, but it results in believers who are more committed to holiness, renewing their mind with God’s word, authentic accountability, processing their emotions with God and others (instead of their emotions being an opportunity for the devil), replacing lies with truth, and practically living out of their identity in Christ. It has resulted in followers of Christ loving God with all their heart (emotions), mind (saturating it with the word of God),

soul (deeper intimacy with Christ) and strength (living a more obedient life). Following this path Paul lays out results in believers becoming more rooted in their identity in Christ as it addresses the six roots of a porn/sex addiction (S.A.I.N.T.S.).

Root of Addiction

Solution

Sexualized
Society

Pursue Holiness

“... put on ... holiness.” (v.24)

Addicted
Brain

Renew the Mind

“... renewed in ... your minds ...” (v.23)

Isolation

Develop Authentic Relationships

“... speak the truth ... we are members of one another.” (v.25)

Negative
Emotions

Process Emotions

“... do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger ...” (v.26)

Trauma

Replace Lies with Truth

“... the truth is in Jesus ... put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor ...” (v.21, 25)

Shame

Live out of an Identity in Christ

“... put on the new self, created after the likeness of God ...” (v.24)

The path to freedom is the path to living out of who we are in Christ: SAINTS. Paul reminds us at the end of Ephesians that the ultimate reason we **sit, walk, and stand** is so we can be a witness to the world around us and help build the Kingdom of God (Ephesians 6:18-20).

The writer of the Hebrews says of this purpose, “let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1). God has a race for us to run, and a purpose for us to pursue, which is to know Christ, to be like Christ, and to make Christ known among all nations. But notice that before we can run the race, we are told to remove the things that slow us down and the sin tripping us up. For today’s generation of Christians, I don’t know of a heavier weight or a more entangling sin than pornography.

The sexual bondage of pornography addiction is a scheme of the devil that keeps God’s children stuck in their old life instead of living the fullness of their new life in Christ. They have salvation, but they are not sitting in their position in Christ. They are sitting in shame. They are not walking in a manner worthy of their calling. They are stumbling in the dark. Why? Because they are not standing against the schemes of the devil. They are not sitting or walking in the truth. God is using this path to bring so much more than just freedom. He is using it ...

- For deep discipleship and to ground believers in their new life in Christ.
- To live more fully out of our union with Christ: I am in Christ and Christ is in me.
- To get more of God’s people out of the shadows and engaged in His Kingdom work.
- For strengthening marriages and families.
- To unleash the power of the gospel in the lives of believers so they can live the fullness of who they are in Christ.
- To set a part more believers who live the resurrected life in Christ.
- To equip believers to help others find freedom from sexual bondage and addiction.

This is what we are seeing. Believers are not just finding freedom; they are running free after Christ and His purposes.

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1 Immorality common fixture of Roman Bath houses

<https://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5849&context=etd>

Brothel advertisement in first century Ephesus <https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/brothel-advertisement-at-ephesus>

2 MacArthur, J.F., Jr. (1986). Ephesians (p.166) Chicago: Moody Press.

3 O'Brien, The Letter to the Ephesians, 323

4 O'Brien, The Letter to the Ephesians, 360

5 O'Brien, The Letter to the Ephesians, 326

6 For the Love of God – Volume Two, D. A. Carson, Chapter 23

7 The Body Keeps the Score, VanDer Kolk, pg. 26-27

8 Soul of Shame, Thompson, pg. 24

9 Daring Greatly, Brené Brown, pg. 69

10 In 2019, the Freedom Fight conducted a survey of over 1,300 college students who say their faith is important to them and who are involved in a collegiate campus ministry. 89% of the men and 51% of the women said they viewed porn at least three times in the last 12 months. Of this group who watched porn, 89% said they felt self-hatred afterward.