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CHRIS AND THE REAL PROBLEM

Here you are today. Far off in the distance—if you did your assignment in Chapter 5—is your vision for the sexual man you are to become. If you are like most men, the distance between here and there seems, to say the least, formidable. But you are challenged not only by the distance to be traveled, but by past failures to break the habits of sexual sin formed by years and years of wrong behavior, habits that may go all the way back to adolescence. Some of it is in the images that are stored in your memory, or in the seemingly involuntary stimulus-response patterns that trigger fantasies that seem to pop into your mind uninvited.

This chapter and those that follow will focus on how we can break habits and tear down strongholds. We are going to start by telling you a little story about Chris. Chris is a good Christian man, a husband and father, a man with a true desire to be all that God wants him to be. Actually, Chris is a composite of hundreds of Christian men to whom we have ministered over the years, men who face mighty strongholds that stood in the way of their becoming the sexual men that God would have them be. I think that many of you will identify with him. Here's Chris's story.

“Not a bad day for a drive,” Chris thought as he tossed his briefcase into the passenger's seat of his car and turned on the ignition. Chris made the drive from his home outside of Washington, D.C. to his company's home office in Bradford, Pennsylvania once or twice a month, and for the most part, he liked the trips. They were an opportunity to have some time to himself, a diversion from the regular routine of his week, and a respite from the steady flow of activities at home, work and church.

Chris had traveled the route to Bradford for a few years now. Sometimes as he drove, he'd work on Scripture memory to occupy his time, or listen to a Christian teaching from church or a men's conference on a CD or tape. Usually, he'd spend at least part of the trip listening to music or talk radio. He especially liked Dr. Laura, and would feel a tinge of self-righteous pleasure as her no-nonsense questions and hard-hitting moral logic would cut right through the gut of those who were blind to how their selfishness and immorality were messing up the lives of their children or other loved ones. Chris appreciated how she unapologetically went against the flow of other popular media personalities who seemed determined to destroy the moral fabric of society. Other times as he drove, he'd let his mind wander to other things.

This morning, once he'd stopped for coffee, returned a couple of calls on his cell phone, and made it through some of the heavier traffic going around D.C., he settled in for the remainder of the drive. It was early fall and the leaves were just beginning to change, some already drifting from the trees on the morning breeze. He thought about how good life was—he had a good job, a wife he loved, two kids, some good friends and a 20-year relationship with Jesus Christ. What more could a guy ask for?

He flipped on the radio and searched for something interesting. After a few minutes of half-hearted trying, he turned the radio off. Chris's mind wandered without effort through a flow of thoughts, memories, sounds and images from different areas of his life, until—if he had stopped to think about it—even he couldn't be sure if he was directing his thoughts or if they were somehow directing themselves. And then a different kind of image came to mind. And something deep in Chris stirred.

The image was of a woman. Not his wife and not a woman that he necessarily even knew. If there had been another person riding in the car watching Chris's thoughts, the image may have passed unnoticed among the others meandering by; but to Chris, something in the image was exciting to him. She was young, attractive, innocent—and sexual. And then in his mind, she was standing alone at the bar of a crowded hotel cocktail lounge. She turned her head and noticed Chris looking at her, caught his eyes for a moment, and then she smiled a smile that seemed to say, "Wow, you are *really* good-looking. I'm getting turned on just staring at you." Then the scene changed, and she and Chris were alone in her hotel room. Her expression, still focused on Chris, was now wild and passionate . . .

As he drove, the previous stream of thoughts that had occupied Chris's mind was overtaken in less than a moment by a faster, warmer, more colorful and more exciting rushing river of sexual fantasies. Once he'd begun, he had no trouble bringing more fantasies to mind. Over the years, Chris had secretly (and sometimes unknowingly) stored thousands if not millions of images in his brain. They were just waiting to come to life, accompanied by one of the hundreds of mental settings, outfits, and scripts also stored there. In essence, he could download and view fantasies faster than any Internet connection ever could.

But unlike videos or Internet files, in Chris's fantasies, he was the writer, the director and usually the star (accompanied by one or more gorgeous leading ladies, of course). He could create new storylines, edit or delete scenes with hardly a thought, change the cast or even adjust an individual cast member's hair color, height, size, occupation, nationality, or personality. And though he didn't typically take notice, the "Chris" in the fantasies was usually never quite the same Chris as in real life.

As often occurred on his trips, Chris lost himself in fantasy—hitting play, pause, fast forward and rewind as many times as he liked. And he did, again and again and again all the way up to Bradford that morning.

When he reached the home office, he had little to no problem switching gears and stopping the "videos." In fact, that afternoon, he conducted his business without ever thinking of sex. But in the back of his mind, he hadn't hit "Stop" or "Eject"; he'd hit "Pause."

After a working dinner with some guys from his department, he walked back to his car and got in. A faint scene from one of the videos had already begun to play as he pulled

out of the restaurant parking lot, and smiled and waved through the window at a couple of the guys still talking on the sidewalk.

In his room, he dropped his keys on the shiny dark wood of the dresser and opened his suitcase. It was 9:30 p.m. He flipped on the TV and skimmed through channels until he found the Washington Nationals game. As he got undressed, he turned the volume down and called his wife. They talked for a few minutes, said goodnight, and Chris turned the volume on the TV up again. As he lay on his bed watching the game, he remembered a scene from one of the fantasies he'd particularly enjoyed on his drive that morning. A tiny voice in his head seemed to say, "Don't do it, Chris. God doesn't want you to do this." Chris hit "Pause" again and turned his attention to the game.

At the next commercial, Chris began flipping through the channels again, just looking for something else good to watch. How many times before had he said that to himself? As the numbers on the TV moved towards a certain grouping of channels, his heart began to pound harder and harder. He knew what he would see if he kept turning stations, and he knew he shouldn't be heading this way. "Chris, don't," said the voice, but he told himself he'd just flip through a couple more stations and then turn back to the game. One of the fantasies he'd had earlier in the day began to play again in his mind; it almost seemed the video player started again on its own in order to drown out the precautionary voices.

A naked image flipped onto the television screen in front of him. All arguments were lost. The idea of turning back to the game hardly crossed his mind. Baseball couldn't hold a match to this. Chris's heart pounded uncontrollably, but he felt very warm and, in a way, relaxed, as though he were sinking into a warm bubble bath. He looked at the clock; it was after 10:30 p.m. and he had to get up by 5:30 a.m. for a breakfast meeting. "I'll just watch for half an hour," he told himself.

Eleven o'clock came and went. "I'll turn this off at 11:15 p.m." he promised. But that was not the last time Chris would promise himself he'd turn the TV off after 15 minutes more. Finally, when he could put it off no longer, he masturbated. His whole body felt alive—washed over by a warm sensation of euphoria.

A few seconds later, the physical pleasure subsided. He pointed the remote at the TV, changed the channel and hit the "Off" button. He looked at the alarm clock on the nightstand; it was almost 1:30 a.m.

He said quietly but harshly to himself, "You idiot! What are you doing?! How weak can you be? You've done this a hundred times, and you've sworn you'd never do it again a hundred times!" The colorful and seemingly friendly flow of thoughts and images he'd indulged in earlier now seemed stagnant and foul. He felt dirty, slimed by all he'd imagined, watched and done.

He had a hard time sleeping that night and kept thinking that if only he could go back and relive the night, he would do things differently. Chris wanted to repent but he felt

unworthy and hypocritical. He had done this kind of thing so many times, and each time he'd confessed and told God he wouldn't do it again. Why would God believe him this time? And in truth, Chris thought it would be good for him to suffer a little before turning to God for forgiveness and mercy. He knew God still loved him, but Chris felt He was probably pretty angry at him right now. Maybe they both needed a little time before it would be good for Chris to come back into God's presence.

The tiredness Chris felt the next morning when his alarm went off was more than enough to remind him of his actions the night before. He hit his pillow with his fist and got out of bed. He knew he wanted to have a prayer time before leaving for his morning meetings, but he felt dirty from all he'd done and opted to shower before spending time with God. He shaved and then got in the shower. As the water poured over him, he confessed the sins he could remember—masturbation, watching pornographic shows on his hotel television, lust and fantasy. He felt ashamed and angry at himself, especially as his confession stirred up some of the sexier images he'd seen. He asked God to cleanse him just as the water of the shower was cleansing his body.

After his shower, he got dressed, sat down and opened his Bible. He actually had a ritual for his “morning after” times. He read Psalm 51, focusing on verse 4: “Against You and You only have I sinned.” Chris confessed each of his sins again. As he prayed, he repeated more than once how sorry he was and that he had known better.

He flipped his Bible to Romans 7 and read aloud Paul's fitting words: *I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate* (verse 15). Like Psalm 51, this was a passage he could relate to this morning. Chris took comfort knowing that the apostle Paul had also struggled with on-going sin, and he wondered what it was that Paul had wrestled with—could he have struggled with masturbation?

He continued to read aloud, feeling an angry crescendo when he got to the *wretched man that I am* in verse 24, and an almost helpless desperation with the words that follow: *Who will deliver me from the body of this death?* He lingered there for a moment, reading that verse again silently and asking the same question with heartfelt angst, *Who will deliver me from the body of this death?* (Verse 25). He felt confused at Paul's answer in the next verse, *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!* Maybe he wasn't so much like Paul after all.

He remembered the voice that had urged him to stop more than once. It seemed God was trying to save him from “the body of this death” but he wasn't letting Him. He apologized for how easily and arrogantly he had dismissed God, and prayed, “Lord, I really am sorry. It's like I basically told you to shut up when You were trying to help me. I will listen to You next time. No matter what, I will.” His words sounded pitiful in his ears. He'd promised that before.

As he got up from the chair and finished getting ready, his mind was bombarded with a slew of familiar thoughts and questions. “Why do I keep doing this!? Will I ever stop?”

What do I need to do to stop? Could it be that I'm just being too hard on myself? At least I didn't get involved with a real woman. I would never do that. But if I loved God more, if I loved my wife more, I wouldn't do this. This is the same as adultery in God's eyes. *I am a wretched man!* Maybe I'm not a Christian. *I hate this, God hates this, so why won't He just take it away from me!?"*

Let's see if we can answer some of Chris's questions.

CHRIS'S REAL PROBLEM

During his "morning-after" time of confession and introspection, as he struggled over the previous night's yielding to sexual sin, one of the questions Chris asked was, "Is there something I don't understand?" If Chris is like most of us, the answer of course is yes. Despite the fact that we may spend a huge amount of time thinking about sex (and a large amount of energy resisting it), and even though we live in a sex-saturated culture, to a great extent our sexuality remains a mystery. *Why do I have the attractions I have? Why do they have such power? Why do I, like St. Paul, sometimes do the very things I don't want to do?* We struggle for answers.

There are a number of things Chris doesn't understand, and as we go forward we will address some of them, but right up front we want to address one of the most critical.

In my years of ministry I have dealt with hundreds of men like Chris, men who regularly succumb to sexual sin. Each man's story is a little different, but their reactions to the sins in their life are surprisingly similar. If I were to list in order of frequency, the sins that men have brought to me as their support group leader, prayer counselor or accountability partner, the list would be like this:

1. Masturbation
2. Pornography (soft core as well as hard core)
3. Cruising (going where sexual excitement is found without acting out)
4. Sexual activity with another person
5. Engaging in lust

Yes, lust is the least frequent. Does this mean that these men don't lust as often they view pornography or go cruising? Of course not. Does it mean that they don't see lust as a sin? Most of them are fairly knowledgeable Christians, and they are familiar with what Jesus said about looking on a woman with lust. No, the problem is that lust just doesn't bother them as much as their other sexual sins do. If a man in an accountability group shares that he has had a "fall", and then goes on to explain that the fall consisted of reveling in sexual fantasies for last night, you can be fairly sure that some of the other men are thinking: Oh, is that all that happened? Let's go on to someone who has *real* problems.

There is a good chance that if Chris's sexual fantasies had stopped on his arrival at the home office and not been picked up again, his quiet time the next day would may have included only a passing, "Forgive me for lusting yesterday."—if that. There would have

been none of the agony and self-flagellation that actually occurred, none of the deep remorse and repentance. And ironically, if he had picked up the fantasies back at the motel room, but not watched pornography or masturbated, he might have been feeling quite good about himself and his “victory.”

I am not heading towards an “all sins are the same” argument. In fact, except for providing graphic evidence of our need for a Savior, all sins are not the same. No, what I am saying is that we often don’t take lust seriously, when in fact: *Lust is the problem.*

It is a problem for two reasons: it is a sin, and it is usually the gateway to other sexual sins.

LUST IS A SIN

This could not have been stated any more clearly than in the words of Jesus, *You have heard that it was said, you shall not commit adultery. But I say to you that every one who looks on a woman with lustful intent, has already committed adultery with her in his heart* (Matthew 5:27-28). Although in some older translations the Bible uses the word lust as a synonym for desire, in most cases lust is clearly a sin, and it is used in a way that marks it as an especially egregious sin. It is often mentioned with killing, coveting and idolatry. In Romans 1:24 it is the result of turning from God.

LUST IS THE GATEWAY TO OTHER SINS

It was Tuesday night and Tom’s wife was at church attending a Sunday school teacher’s meeting. The kids were sound asleep in bed. As has happened so many other times in similar circumstances, a thought occurred to him: The Internet. He had a couple of hours free. No one would know. He thought of the times before, of the tremendous pleasure he had derived from the sexual arousal and eventually from the masturbation and orgasm. He thought of the images he had seen. Maybe they would be even better this time. He pictured a certain type woman, and then a certain sex act. How exciting. How enticing. Before he ever turned the computer on, Tom was deeply into lust, and his entry into fantasy, pornography and masturbation was almost certain to follow. Lust had become the gateway to other sins for Tom on that Tuesday night.

There are only two ways in which a Christian man enters into sexual sin—through lust or through habit. The route through lust will be described in the next chapter. Habit merely shortcuts the lust process, but even the habit got started with lust. Tom, for instance, is well on his way to turning this repeated Tuesday night sin fest into a strongly engrained habit—and he started with lust. Habit presents problems of its own and they will be dealt with in Chapter 10

DEFINING LUST

We all have some understanding of what lust is, but as one Supreme Court Justice said about pornography, we know it when we see it, but we just might not be able to define it. To deal with lust effectively, we need to clearly define it.

In times past the word *lust* was used as a synonym for desire. Even today, we can use the word in a neutral or positive sense, such as in “they have a lust for life” or “he is a lusty man.” But the primary definition found in most dictionaries is along the lines of what we would expect. Lust is defined as a sexual desire that is “unbridled” and ultimately uncontrollable. Unbridled means that the sexual desire is on the loose—it’s not where it’s supposed to be, it’s outside its proper bounds.

Gordon Dalbey⁹ shares the story of a horse boarder’s encounter with one of the large stallions in his keep that had broken out of its stall. With nostrils flaring and penis erect, the stallion was thrashing violently trying to kick down a wooden gate to get to a nearby mare. Though experienced with horses, the boarder was tempted to just run and let the stallion have its way. He knew that if it came down to it, the stallion could kill him. Unbridled, every man’s sexual desire has this capacity as well. And we know it.

Bringing the concept more into the Christian context, *Unger’s Bible Dictionary* identifies three characteristics of lust:

1. It is directed towards a sinful object
2. It preoccupies the mind
3. It is so violent that it overcomes self-control.

Both secular and Christian dictionaries agree that lust is stronger than self-control. Unger helps us by clarifying the concept of the word ‘unbridled.’ A man’s sexual desire is unbridled (has turned to lust) when it is directed at a sinful object and when it is absorbing all his attention. I think Unger’s definition is a good one, and that all three of his conditions have to be present for there to be lust.

LUST VS. DESIRE

A man looks over the fence at his beautiful next-door neighbor and thinks to himself, “I bet she would be great in bed,” then he dismisses the thought immediately. Has he lusted? No, I don’t think he has. We can see that he has a desire—yes a wrongful desire, and one that may indicate a problem in the man’s heart regarding his view of women—but because he is not preoccupied with it and it has no control over him, he has not lusted. *A desire to lust is not the same thing as lust.* This point is critical.

Although most Christians would readily agree that wrongful sexual desires and lust are two different things, in practice this distinction is often not made. One summer evening Reggie was coming out of a counseling session, and was going to get a bite to eat before heading to his men’s Bible study. He was tremendously excited as he left the counselor’s office because he felt that in prayer with his counselor, he had experienced a wonderful breakthrough related to his struggles with sexual sin. Then right outside the counselor’s office he spotted an attractive young woman jogging past. All of the feelings of desire came rushing through Reggie, and he went from elation to despair. Looking at this young woman had ruined everything. When he arrived at the Bible study he shared all of this with the men there. They told Reggie that what happened in no way nullified what

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the Lord had done in the counseling session, and that since he didn't carry the attractions to lust and fantasy as he normally would have done, he had experienced a real victory. It helped, but still it didn't take away all of his disappointment with himself.

It can be discouraging for some men to find that, although they want to stop lusting, the desires they feel may at times still urge them to lust. Reggie was keenly aware that his desires for the jogger running past could lead him to sin, and his awareness was good. It brings to light the fact that his heart still needs to change and that Reggie still needs a Savior.

Since God intended sexual relationships to take place only in the context of a marriage relationship, all desires for sex in any other context are perversions. But unless the desire turns to lust, it is not sin.

SUMMARY

No matter what sexual sins we might struggle with, lust is not the least of our problems, it is the problem. It hurts our souls like all sins do, and what's more, it dangles other sins before us like candy. No sexual sin has the capacity to lead us to other sexual sins like lust does, whether the lust happens with our eyes or just in our heads. We believe this may be why Jesus addressed lust so forthrightly. And why we should, too.

At the same time, we've got to make a distinction between sexual lust and sexual desire. The object of our desire may or may not be sinful, but in either case, the desire itself is not sin. Desires just are. True, they may reveal deep brokenness or sin in our hearts, but still they are not sins. Recognizing the difference between desiring sex and actually lusting will help us to better understand ourselves as sexual beings.

Understanding these concepts will be an important element in the healing process, and we will begin clarifying them more in the next chapter.