

THE ANATOMY OF LUST

When something is broken, we often need to take it apart in order to fix it. We have to examine the component parts to see what is malfunctioning and, if possible fix it. Or, if it can't be repaired, get rid of it.

Our sexuality is broken. What started out as God's wonderful gift, illustrated in Adam's pure delight in and desire for the woman God had given him, broke loose from its intended function, and started taking off in all sorts of directions. For some Christians, this sexuality thing seems unfixable, and so they seek to repress it. A most extreme example of this was early Christians who went out and lived in the desert hoping to avoid the corruptions of the world. I doubt if they succeeded.

I believe that our sexuality is fixable, that even though the repair job may be arduous and take much longer than we would like, it is absolutely worth the effort. More importantly, I believe that the Father wants it fixed. He wants us to enjoy to its fullest this wonderful gift He has given us.

A part of the repair job—an early step on our journey—is to take the broken thing apart, to examine its components that in their broken state so often take us from desire to full-fledged sexual sin. In understanding what is wrong—where we are wrong—we can start to devise strategies that will enable us to restore our sexuality to its proper order.

There is a common process that takes a man from desire through lust and then onto other sexual sins. We see it worked out in Christian men of all sorts and types. And in men who regularly sin sexually, we see the process repeated over and over again. A hedonistic non-believer might go a different route, but for the great majority of Christian men—those who at some level want to be obedient to the Lord—the way of sexual sin usually involves a seven step process. Understanding this can be a vital help in enabling us to move forward on our journey. Here is what the process looks like:

1. THE DESIRE

Men were created with all kinds of desires. Some are for those things that are essential for life: air, food, warmth, sleep. Some are essential for the survival of the community: being in relationships, having children, loving and being loved. And still others enrich our lives: experiencing beauty, being creative, having a sense of accomplishment, feeling good, having fun. All of these desires were created by God, and therefore they are good.

These desires were given in their broader form to all men. But each of us is wonderfully unique, and so we adapt them to our own individual preferences, deciding *how* we like to satisfy them, and ranking them in our own personal priority system. And herein we get into trouble. In our fallen state, we often choose to satisfy some of these desires through

wrongful or sinful means, and we give certain desires much more importance than they should have. The desire for food becomes gluttony; the desire for sleep becomes sloth; the desire for accomplishment turns into a desire to dominate; the desire to have fun, into debauchery; the desire for physical pleasure and the desire to be loved into lust. What's more, for many of us the desire for sexual pleasure starts to take undue precedence over other desires.

None of our desires express themselves in our active minds at every moment. Simply put, we are not aware of all our desires all of the time. Desires express themselves (we become aware of them) when they are triggered. A man's desire to eat may not surface to his active mind until his stomach signals that it is empty, or until he smells a roast cooking in the oven. The desire to eat needs something to trigger it.

It is the same with our sexual desires. Even the most sexually addicted man is not thinking about sex all of the time. For most men, most of the time, sexual desire lies dormant until something triggers it. This something we will call the stimulus.

2. THE STIMULUS

Until a stimulus arises, a sexual desire just lies there, not causing any trouble. But stimuli do come, and they can come from all kinds of sources both internal and external. Most people tend to think that external sources are the main problem because they are so obvious. A man is channel surfing and he happens come across a teenage beach movie showing a beach full of bikini clad beauties. Or he is at the company party and the attractive young lady from Purchasing shows up in a particularly revealing dress, and he finds it difficult to take his eyes off of her. In a sex-saturated society where the idea of modesty in dress and manor seems quaintly archaic, external stimuli are almost impossible to avoid.

But *internal* stimuli are just as pervasive, and can be just as much a stumbling block. A man simply decides to start thinking about sex. Wasn't this what Chris did as he set out to drive to the home office? It is, but another factor was present there. Chris, over a period of time, had formed a *habit* of thinking about sex whenever he was on a long, boring drive. After a number of times, Chris had trained his mind to associate long, boring drives with sexual fantasy. Likewise, Tom in Chapter 6 was forming the habit of going to the Internet to feed his fantasies on evenings when his wife was out and the kids were in bed. With me for many years, simply climbing into bed on nights when my wife was coming to bed later was a sexually tempting time. I had found that the easiest way to free my mind from the day's problems and to relax was to start running some of the sexual videos that had been dwelling in my mind since early childhood.

Habits are stimulus-response patterns that, by repetition, get burned into our brains. A physical event occurs—a boring drive, the wife going out, climbing into bed—and automatically, the mind goes to sexual thoughts.

And it isn't just events that can act as triggers, emotions can also. As we will discuss later, we may run towards lust because we have learned that lust provides one of the

fastest and most effective escapes from pain or stress that we have available to us. This is easily learned. You are angry at your wife, your boss belittles you, you don't know how you are going to pay the bills that are piling up; plug into sexual fantasy and pain and problems disappear instantly. Who can resist such an easy escape?

We don't have to look for that which is overtly sexual or sinful to find things that stimulate us sexually. An attractive female jogger may have no intention of being sexually provocative, but will stimulate some men. Ultimately, sexual stimulation is in the eye—or the mind—of the beholder. Sometimes that which stimulates us has no inherent sexual dimension at all, but we, through past experiences or fantasies, have sexualized it. We have formed pattern of thinking wherein something like an innocent scene in a movie or even an inanimate object can bring our mind to sexual thoughts. It is helpful to know our particular vulnerabilities in such areas

And of course, we need to recognize that there are stimuli that are good. The sight of your wife undressing, the feel of her caress, or the thought of making love to her can all be stimuli for you, and those stimuli are wonderfully good—in fact they are gifts from God that you can feel free to enjoy to the full.

3. TEMPTATION

Temptation takes the desire that was stirred up by the stimulus and contemplates a specific sinful action that we believe will satisfy the desire. In the last chapter, when Reggie spotted the jogger, his eyes fixed on the young girl for a few seconds, but this was a reflection of a habit that had formed in him, by years of looking at women in a certain way. But in this situation, Reggie was not being tempted. Temptation always suggests *doing* something. Reggie wasn't thinking of doing anything with that girl, or at that point, even thinking of using his image to feed future fantasies. To be tempted is always to consider an action, even if that action is only to take place in the mind, such as running the sexual videos stored there.

Most Christians need to be reminded sometimes that—just like desire—*temptation is not a sin*. After forty days in the wilderness without eating, it would be safe to assume that Jesus was hungry. He desired food. But He was not tempted until Satan suggested that He do something specific to satisfy His hunger, that He turn some stones into bread, a specific action to satisfy His desire for food.

Temptation is the knock on the door of our heart, the sinister salesman offering something we think we want. Because it encourages an action, temptation requires that we make a decision. We either accede to it or we don't. We either let it come in or we don't. There is no other option.

As Christian men who want to be obedient to the Lord, and at the same time love the pleasure of sexual arousal, the decision is often not made without a struggle.

4. THE STRUGGLE

After your sexual desire has been aroused by the stimulus, when the temptation begins to knock on the door to your heart, the struggle begins. At this point, most of us would like to think that we're OK as long as we don't open the door. But that's not the experience of most men. For those of us who have repeated struggles with sexual sin, it seems the door we're talking about is a swinging door—the kind with no doorknob and no latch. If the temptation keeps knocking long enough and hard enough, unless actively resisted, it will simply open by default.

Once the struggle starts we have three choices: we can intentionally open the door, we can dilly-dally until the door opens by default, or we can slam it shut and do our best to throw a barricade in front of that door so it can't open. If we don't take definitive action to slam the door shut and keep it shut, the full fledged struggle begins.

When the struggle progresses, we become like the man in the old cartoon with an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other, each whispering in his ear. The first encourages us to go God's way; the other recites all of the delights that will come if we yield to our craving for sexual pleasure. Our hearts go back and forth, saying "I will, I won't I will, I won't. . . ."

The struggle is the crux of the process that either leads to or leads away from sexual sin. Successfully make it through the struggle and you've got it made. Handle the struggle poorly, and you exponentially increase your chances of falling.

Against any justification that we may conjure up to move into sin, there is the voice that says that this must be stopped. The Holy Spirit, or maybe just the lessons learned from childhood, start to declare that this is not right. This is not what God wants me to do.

The struggle may go back and forth for a long while. Often it seems like it goes on much longer than it really does. But the longer the struggle lasts, the more fully the objects of lust take form in the imagination. With every "I will," the object of desire becomes a little more fully formed; the image, a body or body part becomes more and more clear, the sexual act progresses a little further in the imagination. It is at this point that the body starts to respond, and the struggle becomes decidedly more difficult.

I can't make this clear enough. Allowing the struggle to continue is deadly. When we put off our efforts to bring the struggle to an end (even just for a little while), our passivity or inaction is like throwing raw flesh to a ravenous lion crouched outside our door. We are feeding the desire for sexual sin while it grows stronger and stronger, until—at a moment we cannot determine—it is too powerful for us, the door crashes open, and we are devoured.

Somewhere in the midst of this struggle, the man has fallen into lust. The desire has "engrossed the mind," become "so violent as to overcome self-control." He did not rein it in in time, and so now it has become "unbridled."

It is in the midst of the struggle that some men call on techniques designed to draw their minds away from sexual thoughts. A man might recite a Scripture that he has memorized for just this kind of situation. I sometimes start praising God, or maybe just start saying the word “Jesus” over and over again. Men in our support groups know that this is a good time to call their accountability partner.

The techniques often work. That is why those experienced in this area recommend them. But there is a big problem here. We don’t have to avail ourselves of these techniques or resources. We can know that they are available, but we choose not to use them. A man knows that he can call his accountability partner, but he simply decides not to do it.

5. THE DECISION TO ACT OUT

This is where we make the conscious and deliberate decision to stop the struggle and to embrace the sin.

Despite what the enemy has said, the struggle does not go on forever. It will end. On some occasions we will whisk the little devil off of our shoulders and the desires will retreat back to their dormant state—at least eventually.

Other times it will be the angel that is whisked away. Despite the voice of the Holy Spirit, despite our knowledge of right and wrong, despite our awareness of the longer term negative consequences that will come from making the wrong decision, sexual craving wins and the decision is made to yield to the temptation.

The enemy has a particularly clever way of getting Christians to do this. We hear the knock on the door, we go to the door, face our temptation, and it says to us, “Can I come in and spend some time with you?” We say, “Yes, you can come in, but just for a short while. We’ll have a drink together and then you’ll have to leave.” In other words, I’m going to play around with lust just a bit, enjoy a little pleasure, and then stop before it goes too far. How many times have we done this? Will we ever learn? Remember the description of lust—so violent as to overcome self-control. We say we won’t let it go too far, but we already have.

6. ACTING OUT

Although they may not have consciously defined it, to most men “a little too far” probably means having reached the point of orgasm either by masturbation or sex with another person. But acting out is not confined to these behaviors. There are activities which often precede masturbation or sex with another person but which are, in and of themselves, forms of acting out. We will be helped if we acknowledge that even when no orgasm occurs, these three practices are forms of sinful sexual acting out:

Fantasy – Some men, who for religious or other reasons, seldom or never masturbate, will still find great pleasure in sexual fantasy. Here, we are not talking about the brief mental images that are a part of temptation or the struggle, but the holding onto and manipulating of those images to bring extended sexual pleasure. Chris’s mental videos are a clear example of sexual fantasy.

Rather than enjoy a fifteen minute fireworks show that ends with a grand finale, a man may choose to enjoy a forty-five minute show without the finale. And, if he is a Christian, he may be quite satisfied with himself for the choice he made; he never masturbated.

Engaging in fantasy does not necessarily mean that a man seriously wants to engage in sex with someone who is not his wife. Chris never considered adultery. But he loved the prolonged physical pleasure that fantasy brought him, and it is a sinful form of acting out. In addition to being a sin, this “less serious” form of acting out, like the more blatant fornication and adultery, has the capacity to corrode a man’s personality, his creativity, his relationships, his very mind over time.

Flirting or Cruising – Some of the desires or needs that drive us towards sexual activity have nothing to do directly with sex. A man may crave having a woman show that she desires him, so he will set up a situation in which a woman might come on to him or simply look his way. For one of our clients, Stan, this often came while he was driving—he would look to other drivers on the road, hoping to find a physically attractive woman looking back at him. If one was, he said his heart would pound at the thrill of it. Or, a man may have a desire to manipulate women, and playing the sex game enables him to do this. We see this in men who are not adulterers.

Among homosexual men we have what we call “dry cruising”—going to a place where other men will show an interest in them, even when they have no intention of engaging in sex. The homosexual man simply wants to know that he is desirable to another man. In my years of cheating on my wife, there were times when I would stop at a gay bar on the way home from work even though I knew I could not explain being more than a half hour late. A sexual contact was not an option, and yet I would still go, just hoping some man’s interest in me would show that I could be worth something to a man, even if it was only for sex.

Both flirting and cruising can be used to bring some excitement into what is otherwise seen as a dreary life. After I left homosexuality, I did not miss the sex, but for a time I did miss the excitement that came with the hunt. In retrospect, it seems that I was hooked on my own adrenaline.

Like fantasy, this may seem a less serious sexual sin, but it is destructive, and perhaps more so because it inevitably affects other people.

Using Pornography – This is the most obvious, and in today’s culture, the most widespread form of acting out; using pictures or stories to bring about sexual excitement. The statistics on how widespread the use of pornography has become, even among Christians, are depressing. This is such a major obstacle on many men’s journey towards becoming God’s sexual man, that we will deal with it in detail in Chapter 11.

7. ORGASM

For most men, prolonged lust invariably leads to masturbation or to having sex with another person. Rare is the man who can go through a prolonged period of sexual fantasy and not masturbate. Lust is gluttonous—an ever-hungry beast, never satisfied no matter how much it consumes. It keeps demanding more and more, and its ultimate “more” is the enormous pleasure of ejaculation. Everything cries out for completion, and orgasm is the completion of the sexual process.

This then is the process of sinning sexually: Desire, Stimulus, Temptation, Struggle, Decision, Acting Out and Orgasm. Of course when we are in the midst of the process it never appears this orderly and deliberate. If we were to picture the process, it probably would look more like a ball rolling down a hill than a ball bouncing from step to step. And, Steps 2, 3, 4 and 5—from stimulus to decision—can happen so quickly that we are not even conscious of what is happening—until we find ourselves acting out. In fact, habits can become so entrenched in us that we may go automatically from stimulus to acting out.

If you have recently engaged in sexual sin, go back and examine your route into that sin. What was the stimulus? What happened in the struggle? What caused you to eventually yield?

Understanding this process and seeing how it works in your life is essential if you are to develop the strategies that will take back your sexuality from lust. Take a look at the chart on the following page, and think of these steps in relation to your own patterns of falling into sexual sin. The key point is that lust is the real problem, and either it will begin during the struggle or it won't begin at all. If it does, the process will likely continue to its usual culmination. If it doesn't, you have won another victory.

In coming chapters we will examine ways in which we can abort the process.

THE ORIGINS OF AND LIFESPAN OF SEXUAL SIN

DESIRE	STIMULUS	TEMPTATION	STRUGGLE	DECISION TO ACT	ACTING OUT	ORGASM
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing • May be good, evil or neutral • Acknowledged but not always on the conscious mind 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can come from internal or external sources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The knock on the door • Always contemplates an action • Thoughts of how the desire might be satisfied 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I will, I won't, I will, I won't.... • Temptations grow more explicit • Physical responses start • Lust begins or is rejected 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conscious acceptance—yielding to the struggle • May be just to hold on to images • Involves saying “no” to God 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of porn, fantasy, flirting or cruising as well as fornication, adultery, homosexual behavior, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usually but not always

But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire, when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

James 1:14-15