

8

THE GRAND STRATEGY

For those of you men who picked up this book seeking to find help in gaining more victories in your struggles with sexual sin, we are finally there! I don't apologize for the delay because I firmly believe that if our primary focus is on becoming the sexual men God calls us to be, rather than on how we can successfully battle sexual sin, we actually will achieve more frequent and more lasting victories over sexual sin. And besides, becoming the sexual men God calls us to be is a part of becoming the sons who delight the Father, and this is a far more noble and worthwhile cause than just becoming men who don't sin sexually.

Sexual sin is merely the debris that makes our journey on this path more difficult. Let's continue to think of it in that context.

As with any great endeavor, becoming God's sexual man requires a strategy. When it comes to sexual matters this strategy must have a defensive component—fighting off temptations when they attack us—and an offensive component—moving forward to become the new kind of man that our spiritual rebirth made it possible for us to become. This chapter will present such a strategy, a grand strategy, that encompasses both a defensive and an offensive component.

Within the context of this overall strategy, Chapter 9 will address defensive measures that we can take to meet the daily assaults of sexual temptation when they hit us, and Chapter 10 will deal with specific sexual sin strongholds that become rooted in our lives. Then in Chapters 11, 12 and 13 respectively, we will deal with pornography, masturbation and fantasy, and with the too often neglected role of demonic or satanic influences in sexual temptation and sin. Then, hopefully, having put the devil in his place, we will get back to moving forward on our journey of becoming the sexual man God calls us to be.

THE GRAND STRATEGY

To start unfolding the Grand Strategy, I want to go back to our explanation of how sexual sin operates in us, as laid out in the last chapter. Most of us operate under the influence of some serious errors in this arena. Reggie, in Chapter 6, erred when he condemned himself for feeling attractions to the jogger. Chris, in the same chapter, erred when he thought that he was doing okay so long as he didn't carry his fantasies all the way through to masturbation. Both men had a faulty view of sexual sin; one seeing it too early, the other too late. As a result, both were handicapped in their efforts to achieve more victories over lust. Many men are like Reggie; they see their sinful desires and their temptations as sin. This leaves them feeling defeated before the struggle has even begun, so when it does come, they are at a great disadvantage.

Others, like Chris, feel that they haven't really sinned until they have had an ejaculation, or at least until they are sexually aroused and fully engrossed in fantasies or in hard core pornography. They have waited too long. Having failed to recognize that when they chose to play with wrongful sexual images in their minds, they were already in sin, they have lost the battle before they ever entered the struggle.

To be more consistent in achieving victories over sexual temptation, we need to take a closer look at how we get into sexual sin. Many men, like Reggie and Chris, have some wrong ideas about this. As with any battle, if we don't know our enemy—and sexual sin is our enemy—we are at a great disadvantage and are likely to lose.

In the last chapter we described the seven step process wherein sexual sin has its way with us. In the chart sexual sin starts—or doesn't start—in the struggle. To lead a more chaste life therefore, we must either win in the struggle, or do something earlier on so that we never get to the struggle. This means that we have three possible means of achieving victory: (1) change our desires, (2) avoid all stimuli and temptations, or (3) win when we are in the struggle. There are no other ways. Let's consider each.

CHANGING OUR DESIRES

We only get into the struggle because we have sinful desires that somehow get triggered and lead us into temptation. Wouldn't it be far better to change the situation in the early stages so we never had to enter into the struggle at all? Of course it would, and the earlier we could change things the better. This means changing our desires.

Think of how terrific it would be if you could simply decide that from this day forward your only sexual desires will be towards your wife (or future wife if you are single). Or, what if you prayed for God to change your desires and He did—immediately?

Can these things happen? Certainly they can, but barring a true miracle—and miracles are rare and are at God's discretion, not ours—any change in sexual desires will be a long term process. In the shorter term there is little *we* can do about our sexual desires, even the sinful ones. They just are.

I once heard an old Pentecostal preacher say, "Since I came to Christ, I can do anything I want to do. But God sure changed my want-to-dos." He will do that for you, but if you are like most men, some of it will take a long while. Still, hold on to this hope.

AVOIDING THE STIMULI

Okay, so for now you probably have to live with sinful desires. Then how about avoiding all stimuli and temptations? You don't need me to tell you that this is impossible. You can—and should—do things to reduce the external stimuli, but so much of the stimuli comes upon us either from external sources which occurred through no fault of our own, or from the storehouse of images, memories and imaginations already stored in our mind which sometime seem to surface for no reason that we can identify.

Some men in the early church went out into the North African desert to try and avoid everything that could tempt them to sin. Updating what these early Christians did, you might decide to go to work in an all male research center in the farthest reaches of the Antarctic. (I am assuming that your attractions are totally heterosexual.) Do you think you would be free from all sexual temptations there? It's doubtful.

And, as I mentioned in the last chapter, there are some non-sexual things that we, through our imaginations or behaviors, have sexualized. How can we hope to avoid these?

THE GRAND STRATEGY – PART 1

In the short run we are limited in what we can do before the struggle—we can't, at will, change our desires, and it is impossible to remove ourselves from all stimuli and temptations. After the struggle we are already in sin. So any strategy that will be worth the energy needed to pursue it must focus in on the struggle. This is the place where our battles will be won or lost. Your experience in these struggles is probably like most men's. You win some, you lose some. As a Christian man you want to please God and you feel that you lose too many.

I believe that a closer look at what goes on during the struggle will reveal a strategy that can do much to help Christian men gain more victories. The chart showed that several things happen in the struggle. Let's look at them more closely:

1. ***The temptations grow more explicit.*** The longer the temptation goes on the more fully developed it becomes. It can go something like this:
 - A man receives an e-mail ad with a picture of a woman who is "his type".
 - In his mind he pictures a part of her body.
 - He says, "I won't!" A few seconds pass.
 - He pictures his hand on that body part.
 - He says, "I won't!" A few more seconds pass
 - She smiles and says she likes it.
 - He says, "I won't!" A few more seconds pass.
 - She asks, "Would you like to _____?" and she suggests a sex act.
 - He says, "I won't"—or does he?

With every passing second of the struggle, his imagination has expanded the imagery. It has become more and more enticing—and more and more difficult to resist.

2. ***The body starts to respond.*** The first response to sexual interest is in the brain. Sexual thoughts cause endorphins to be released in the brain. These chemicals, sometimes called the brain's "natural morphine," have a calming, soothing, pain killing effect on the brain. They are not just sexually activated—strenuous physical exertion and other things can be the triggers—but they always come with sexual interest, and they produce a wonderful feeling of wellbeing.

Then the central nervous system starts running its current to the pelvic area. At first it feels like a soothing current running through the scrotum, the penis and the lower belly.

As the penis starts to swell, the pleasurable feeling increases. At the same time, to pump more blood into the penis and in anticipation of what may come, the heart starts to beat faster. A man starts to feel exhilarated. At this point we have the combination of the body coming alive and the brain being soothed. What could feel better than this?

This is what happens during the struggle, and up to a point the longer the struggle goes on, the more intense the pleasure becomes, and the more difficult it becomes to stop the process. The body seems to be crying out, "Don't stop now!"

3. *There is no clear line marking when temptation turns to lust.* We slide from temptation into lust. No red lights go off, no sirens alert us. We simply find ourselves there. The idea that, "I won't let this thing go too far" is a deception. We don't know when it goes too far. The decision to act—the next step on our chart—is merely an affirmation of something that was decided in our hearts as we slid from temptation into lust.

These realities of the struggle point to what is incontrovertibly the best strategy for gaining more victories. When temptation knocks and starts to push open the door:

Our best chance for gaining victory is to slam the door shut the instant it starts to open; the instant that temptation makes its presence known.¹⁰

Before the temptation has become more explicit, before the body has responded, we face the best odds we will ever have in the struggle. This is not to say that we can never escape temptation later on, or that we can't stop the process even in the midst of acting out, but the best time—the easiest time—is to declare a resounding "NO!" when temptation first hits.

Well, that's it. That's our strategy for victory. End of this part of the book, right? Not quite. If only it were that simple. This is only Part 1 of our strategy

THE GRAND STRATEGY – PART 2

Sometimes a man opens the door, sometimes he doesn't. Why did you open the door yesterday, but didn't for two weeks prior to that? Why does Mike open the door 90% of the time and Sam only 20%? Why can't you refuse to extend the invitation 100% of the time; well maybe 90? How about 51%? Why, why, why?

The answer has to do with our hearts

¹⁰ Many months after I wrote this chapter, I started using Thomas A. Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* in my daily quiet times. I was quite amazed to read what this great Christian had to say about temptation 500 years ago: "For first there cometh to mind a bare thought, then a strong imagination, afterward delight, an evil motion, and then consent. And so little by little our wicked enemy gathereth complete entrance, while he is not resisted in the beginning." (page 56 from Moody Classics edition of *The Imitation of Christ*). Indeed, there is nothing new under the sun.

For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.

Matthew 15:19

The heart is at the center of who we are. What we choose to do or not to do is primarily determined by our hearts. Dallas Willard refers to our hearts as the core of our being, “the executive center,” and its job is to “organize our life as a whole”¹¹. If you were a company, your heart would be the person in charge of the company, its CEO. Granted, no company operates completely as the boss directs, but as the saying goes, “The buck stops here.” As far as your behaviors go—the actions you do or do not take—the buck stops at your heart.

A man’s heart is the lodging place for his emotions, for his wounds and his unmet needs, for his deepest desires, and all of the beliefs that he holds to be true. And these are the things that guide his behavior. This leads us to Part 2 of the Grand Strategy:

To change how he responds when sexual temptations hits, a man has to change his heart.

As we deal with these things, things that help form our innermost being, our hearts will be changed, and in those first critical moments of temptation, if our hearts are being changed for the good, we will more often make decisions that are pleasing to God, decisions that move us a step further in becoming the men God created us to be.

Most of us deal with sexual temptation when it arises, one battle at a time. We don’t seek to bring about the fundamental internal changes that will give us a strategic advantage for all future temptations. In doing this we are like a man standing on a castle wall, shooting arrows at an approaching army while someone below, inside the castle, is opening the doors and inviting the enemy in. How many times have you sworn you’d never do something again, only to do it? How many time have you promised yourself that was the last time, but it wasn’t? I remember times of committing to God that I wouldn’t act out sexually, and then within minutes I had turned. I was shooting the best arrows I had, standing with the most resolve I could muster, but something inside of me wasn’t on board. My heart needed to change.

It is not unreasonable to say that changing the heart is always and will always be a part of the normal Christian life. Every human being is always being changed in his or her heart, whether for good or for evil. As believers we are being changed all the time; the new creature that we are at conversion (2 Corinthians 5:17) is not fully manifested in an instant—we are in a process of becoming new. And although it is God’s power that makes it possible to change for good at these deep levels, our cooperation with His plan is essential. For as those of us who find ourselves being controlled by lust in one fashion or another know, the Christian’s heart is also able to grow more wicked.

¹¹ ***Willard, p. 30, 35

Because our hearts are so central to who we are, because they determine how we respond when we are tempted, we need to know how, if possible, to change them. Where do we even start? We remember that our hearts were changed when we first accepted Jesus, but it didn't take long for most of us to realize that some things still hadn't changed. If Christ worked to miraculously change our hearts at conversion, then how do we join Him to bring about further change now?

I see five aspects of our life that help form the state of our hearts. These are not five steps that will bring us pure God-loving hearts. There is nothing sequential about them. They are five areas in which we live all of the time, and how we live in them determines the state of our hearts and the measure of the man that we are.

CHANGING THE HEART

On July 29, 1996, my heart was changed forever. On that day a doctor at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore cut open my chest, hooked me up to a heart-lung machine and proceeded to cut out a damaged mitral valve and replace it with an artificial one. He stapled me back up, I went through a time of recovery, and then, with a better functioning heart, I was healthier and stronger than I had been for a number of years.

Oh, if only changing our deep hearts, our core being, were so simple. Our hearts are a mystery, so much so that we are told that they are *deceitful above all things* (Jeremiah 17:9). We cry out to God to *create in me a clean heart, O God* (Psalm 51:10) because we know that we can't touch our hearts directly ourselves. But the Christian life is about heart changing, and there are things that we can do, that through God's working in us, will change our hearts.

I am going to suggest five ways our hearts are changed, and as befits the subject of this book, they will relate to our male sexuality.

1. OUR HEARTS ARE CHANGED AS WE COME TO KNOW GOD'S TRUTH

Truth dwelling in our hearts is essential for our becoming more Godly men. Confusion, false beliefs and uncertainty will make us unstable men, men who are tossed about by our desires and passions. We need to know the truth, the truth about sin and righteousness, about who we are and who we are to become.

What we believe has a tremendous impact on how we live. Beliefs, not only guide our behavior, they affect our feelings, and our feelings greatly influence our behavior. If I believe that every man is entitled to "great sex", not only will I act in pursuit of such sex, but I will feel deprived and frustrated when I don't get it. Such feelings will motivate me further to seek out such sex. On the other hand, if I believe that sex is a wonderful gift from God meant to be used as an expression of love between a husband and wife, I will be more content in single celibacy or in marital fidelity.

This book is rooted in the truths found in The Theology of the Body because I, and others on our Regeneration staff, found them to be the truest and clearest Biblically consistent teachings about our body and our sexuality that we have ever encountered. They provide a solid foundation on which we can stand as we pursue related truths like those to come later regarding masturbation and pornography, marriage and singleness.

As we receive and accept the truth, and as it becomes etched deeply into our hearts, whenever the tempter comes knocking at the door, he will be met by our mighty guardian, Truth.

...you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.

John 8:31

This is profoundly true with respect to our male sexuality.

2. OUR HEARTS ARE CHANGED THROUGH WHAT WE DO

Believing the right things and knowing the truth is critical, but it alone will not change our hearts. Remember the scribes and the Pharisees. They had more information and direct knowledge of the Scriptures than most of us will ever have. And yet their hearts were unwilling and unable to recognize the Messiah when He was standing right in front of them!

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about Me, yet you refuse to come to Me that you may have life (John 5:39-40).

James tell us, *But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves* (James 1:22). We have to live out what we know is true, and we do this in the daily decisions of life and in our day by day actions. Every yielding to lust changes who we are just a little bit. Every successful resistance to temptation changes us also. In the short run, we see this in our tendency to either binge on sex or to experience significant periods of sexual purity. Our current behavior, as experienced in today's battles, is affecting us profoundly in the long run also, as each victory strengthens our manly character, and each failure weakens it. Our character is a part of our hearts.

You may see a problem here. We want to change our hearts so we can change our behavior. But now I'm suggesting that changing our behavior is one of the ways we change our hearts. Isn't this circular thinking? It could be, but don't think of it as a circle, think of it as an upward spiral. Righteous acts change who we are, and as we change who we are we become more likely to do righteous acts. Of course, the reverse is true also; there can be a downward spiral in which sin darkens our hearts and leads to more sin.

But as men who earnestly desire to please the Lord, God wants to lead us onward and upward to a place of greater and greater obedience. More victories will beget more victories.

...But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

Romans 6:17-18

The key message here is that we never give up trying to be obedient. If we fall, we get up and try again.

3. OUR HEARTS ARE CHANGED THROUGH LIFE-GIVING RELATIONSHIPS

The men we are—and thus our hearts—will be changed by the people with whom we associate. Our relationships, male and female, affect us all, but I believe that apart from our marital relationship, we men are most affected by our male relationships. It is not just young boys who change and grow by viewing certain men as role models. Whether we want to or not, we are all changed to some degree by the men with whom we associate, and with whom we identify.

Paul wrote that, *Bad company ruins good morals* (1 Corinthians 15:33). It could also be said that good company strengthens good morals.

Nothing inspires me to be a better man more than being in the presence of good men. Nothing gives me more hope that I can grow in manly virtues than seeing such virtues in other men.

If the Holy Spirit has hold of us, such men motivate us to strive more heartily for manly virtues. If sin is reigning in our lives, good and virtuous men will stir up feelings of jealousy, resentment and rebellion in us.

Of course, we all need one or two or three men with whom we are very close, men to whom we can be accountable, to whom our hearts are truly exposed. This is obvious to almost everyone. But not so obvious in today's somewhat feminized culture, is that a major portion of our life-giving male relationships can come in being part of a group of men.. That's the way we men are made. In this we are a bit like pack animals. We are energized and motivated by being a part of a group of men, men with whom we share values, men who have had similar experiences, men whose eyes are all on the same target. In the context of what we are discussing here, that target is *the upward call of God in Christ Jesus* (Philippians 3:14) drawing us to what is good and true and beautiful, and away from what is evil and false and sordid.

Jesus did not call his disciples one at a time, give them intensive personal training, and then send them out. No, He called them as a group and kept them together from the start of His ministry until at least the time of His ascension. Surely they grew as they interacted with one another, and perhaps more importantly, as they observed one another interacting with Jesus. Even Peter's tragic denial of the Lord and Thomas's doubting most likely taught lessons to the others.

Relationships with special brothers and with the larger company of men will change our hearts.

4. OUR HEARTS ARE CHANGED BY OUR WILLINGNESS TO ENDURE PAIN AND TO DIE

"No pain; no gain." This is probably one of the most common—and often unwelcome—clichés that we ever hear. I happen to believe it is also one of the truest.

If you are not willing to endure pain, you will never experience victory over sexual sin. If you are not willing to endure pain, it is quite likely that your heart will stay frozen where it is, and you will not grow as a sexual man, or as any other kind of man for that matter.

In the big picture of things, the pain that we endure from denying ourselves immediate sexual gratification that is available through lust is pretty small potatoes. But we don't usually live in the big picture; we live in the now.

Stan has gone to bed after seeing something on TV that would regularly get him turned on sexually. He had a bad day at work, he and his wife spent the evening grumbling at each other, and he felt all round tired and depressed. The TV images wouldn't go away, and Stan just ached to get himself fully aroused and masturbate. After about ten minutes of struggle, he concluded that unless he gave in the feelings would never go away and he would never get to sleep. Stan worried a lot about not getting enough sleep. So give in he did.

To have done otherwise, Stan would have had to been willing to endure pain. Looked at objectively, it doesn't look like too great a pain, but objectivity is usually not one of our strong suits where lust is involved. Complicating the matter, and making his yielding more understandable, Stan actually faced three types of pain. First, obviously, he was denying himself physical pleasure. This was not too different from pain one experiences in denying himself the last piece of pie in the refrigerator. Second, and this may have been a more critical factor, he was denying himself a means of escaping from the feelings of tiredness and depression he was facing. Lust is one of the most powerful drugs we have available to escape from any kind of emotional pain. We discuss this fully in Chapter 12. Thirdly, he faced the anxiety and mental strain of a thinking he might lie awake for hours.

Although even collectively, the pains were not major, for Stan, and countless men like him, the pain was too much and he was not willing to endure it.

Suppose Stan had said to himself—and to the Lord—“no matter what, if I never get to sleep tonight, I will not give in to this thing.” By his willingness to endure the pain, he may well have experienced victory, and ironically, there is a good chance that in his willingness to endure the pain he would have ended this particular battle and soon been fast asleep.

If, in the face of repeated sexual temptation, we are willing to go through the pain, our hearts will change. One of the clearest marks of man’s maturity is his willingness to defer gratification. Repeated acts of deferring gratification strengthen our manhood, giving us the heart of a man.

There is another way that our willingness to endure pain works into the picture. Pain comes from saying “Not now!” Death comes from saying “Never!” This is the death that leads to life. Enduring pain may lead us to that critical place where “Not now!” becomes “Never!” Most men go through an enormous amount of pain before they ever say “Never”—in a way that really means never. Never has to do with tearing down strongholds, the subject of Chapter 13. Just remember that our willingness to endure pain is an essential ingredient in achieving our daily victories and in achieving those great breakthroughs that change the whole course of our journey.

More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope...

Romans 5:3-4

5. OUR HEARTS ARE CHANGED AS WE SPEND TIME WITH GOD

When I am asked how a person overcomes homosexuality or sex addiction, I reply simply that we overcome these things through our relationship with Jesus Christ. This is a profound and true answer, but it is almost always a big letdown to the questioner.

It is a letdown because the questioner is looking for steps, or a program, or some enlightened new approach, and what I am proposing to him is, in effect, the “normal Christian life”.

Men, our hearts are changed primarily as we experience Jesus Christ. If you are leading the “normal Christian life” described in the Chapter 5, your heart is changing in ways that will lead you to more frequent righteous responses when temptation comes. Your will is coming more and more into line with God’s plan for your life.

As with our lives in general, we don’t all live the Christian life to its fullest. Turn back to Chapter 5 and examine the elements of the normal Christian life, and consider the degree to which they are a part of your life.

A key element in the normal Christian life is having a quiet time, the time we spend one-on-one with God. Quiet times are also a key element in changing our hearts, for it is in quiet times that we allow God's Word to penetrate our hearts. It is when we take time to praise and thank Him that our hearts grow in their capacity to love Him. It is in our special time with Him that He gives us the power to make the life changes that are required if we are to experience true sonship.

For the past 34 years, at least five days a week, usually for an hour to an hour and a half, I have spent time with the Lord. Without these times, I never would have been able to begin and lead Regeneration. Certainly I would not have been able to write this book. My life flows out of those early morning hours I spend with Jesus.

For years I encouraged men in our groups to have consistent quiet times. I used to say that this was the one area in my life where, like Paul, I could legitimately say, "Be like me". But over the years, I realized I have some advantages in this regard. Having had a dramatic conversion and healing, I started my Christian life with a heart that couldn't get enough of Jesus. I, by nature, am a contemplative man, so quiet prayer and meditation comes easily to me. I am a morning person, and a few minutes after waking I am probably at my peak efficiency. All of this has made consistent quiet times easy for me.

Over the years I have come to see that most men are not like me, and for many having meaningful quiet times is much more difficult. This is particularly so with men who by their nature are more doers than meditators. But nevertheless, every man needs to do his best, to give high priority to, his special daily time with the Lord. I am not a natural leader or teacher or speaker, but God put me in a place where I had to do things, and I did them. It is the same with quiet times. Even if it defies your natural leanings, time with the Lord is essential to a man's growth. I believe God wants this time with you, so trust Him, even if the times seem barren much of the time, persevere.

How can a young man keep his way pure?

By guarding it according to Your word.

With my whole heart I seek you: let me not wander from your commandments!

I have stored up Your word in my heart that I might not sin against You.

Blessed are you, O Lord; teach me Your statutes!

With my lips I declare all the words of Your mouth.

In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches.

I will meditate on Your precepts and fix my eyes on Your ways.

I will delight in Your statutes; I will not forget Your word

Psalm 119: 9-16

As we spend time with the Lord, such a pleading can become truly ours, and our hearts will be changed.

SUMMARY

Our road to becoming the sexual men God calls us to be, will be marked by countless decisions that we will make in the face of temptation to lust. Remembering that making the right decision as early as possible puts us at a huge advantage, and furthers us on our journey. But whether we make the right or wrong decision is not just a reflection of where we are in our sexuality; it is a reflection of where our hearts are with God. As fallen men whose sexuality has taken on a life and will of its own, it will take changed hearts to bring our parts back together. Our journey, therefore, is not just one of becoming God's sexual men, but of becoming men who have a heart after God.