



Understanding the Cycle of Sexual Addiction

Part I - Discerning the Red Flags

By Bob Honeysett

"I have the right to do anything," you say—but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything"—but I will not be mastered by anything. (1 Cor. 6:12-NIV)

Sexual addiction is not formally recognized in the bible of psychiatry, **The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)**. The folks at DSM should spend a few minutes talking to me because I think I could share enough with them to get sexual addiction recognized in their next edition.

Following Christ over the last 30 years has opened my eyes to a lot I didn't know about myself. Jesus has helped me to see that I am slightly obsessive-compulsive (always wondered about that fascination with the number 4 – but that is an article for another time), I tend to overeat to fill the seeming voids in my life, I struggle with feelings of abandonment and worthlessness, and when the going gets really tough, I've been forced to confront the fact that I prefer pornography to prayer. Not that I go to the dark places when the going gets tough, but let's just say I have to fight my natural instincts to find Jesus when everything goes wrong.

If I've jolted you off of your chair, I apologize. I am not aiming for shock value, I'm just admitting what I know to be my bent toward addictive behavior. It has taken me the better part of the 30 years I mentioned to admit those things to myself. Hopefully in sharing them, I can help someone else come to the same level of freedom that I have.

We all struggle with addictive behavior in some way or another, some behaviors more destructive than others. It would take us days to formulate a complete list of those things that have a tendency to master us; drugs, alcohol, sex, pornography, relationships, food, smoking, fame, fortune, the desire to be the center of attention....like I said, the complete list would take days. For those of us following Jesus, we have the desire to do the right thing and "not be mastered by anything" as the Apostle Paul stated, yet many times we find ourselves in a place where our weaknesses win out over our best intentions.

Pornography was my drug of choice and I came upon it very innocently at a young age. My father had a few stashed copies of Playboy that he kept hidden in his bedside nightstand that I stumbled onto. At 12 years old, those images were electric, exciting, and always left me with a desire for more. From Playboy, it wasn't too long before I came upon hardcore pornography that a friend of mine had found in the park.

These uncensored images heightened the excitement I felt, and I can still remember the feeling of the adrenaline surges that flew through my brain.

It wasn't long before pornography became the be all and end all for me. Upset, bored, tired, scared, it didn't matter, porn and that adrenaline surge always got me past it all and left me with a feeling that everything was going to be okay. The destructive part of the habit was that as time went on, I needed more and more intensity in the images I looked at in order to keep the adrenaline moving. That's how I passed over from heterosexual to gay porn, and eventually wanted to act out the things I was seeing in magazines.

Upon accepting Jesus as my Lord and Savior, I knew I needed to put pornography into perspective. I went through a real battle, a withdrawal, if you will, to get those images out of my mind. I had to find a new way to deal with the upset, bored, tired, scared times in my life without lapsing from one addiction to another. It was uphill all the way, but God was full of mercy and grace every time I fell. I always managed to find myself back on my feet moving forward in my relationship with Him. In other words, He didn't strike me dead because of my weakness. He continually showed me that because of Jesus, I could live life free from the sin, habits and addictions that could tie me down.

In the Living Waters program we've facilitated, author Andy Comiskey shed some light on the habits we fall into and the choices we make. In dealing with the subject of addiction, he says; *"Simply put, pain prompts us to attach to pleasurable objects. Having been hit broadside by some hurtful reality, we seek out pleasure to crowd out whatever unpleasant emotional state we find ourselves in. Pleasure rewards us by helping us to displace the pain. When the pain arises again, we tend to opt for the release that the object of pleasure affords us. Before long, our systems can't function without the pleasurable release."*¹

As Poster Boy for the preceding paragraph I've come to some harsh realizations about myself, one of which is that when everything starts to go wrong, my natural impulse is to head toward the darkness for my relief. That adrenaline rush still calls out to me 30 years later. It's like that old Simon and Garfunkle song that states, *"Hello darkness, my old friend. I've come to talk to you again."* I've realized that I got a lot of comfort from the darkness, and that's probably why I want to go back there over and over, in spite of the greater comfort I've gotten from the Lord. There is no explanation, other than, I am a sinner saved by grace.

For me, understanding the addictive cycle has been a major key in helping me to break out of patterns of behavior. Knowing the cycle itself has been a tremendous safety net in my life. It is important for each of us to know what the onset of a spiritual fall looks like, so we can plan ahead when the pattern starts to show itself.

Over the next few articles, I want to spend time examining three different steps in the addictive cycle. The steps themselves are outlined in the **Living Waters** manual as *Red Flags*, *Reflex* and *Ritualization* (I claim no credit for coming up with them). During this series, I will identify each step in the cycle, and then, elaborate on what that portion of the cycle looks like in my life.

The RED FLAG

I liken the red flag to the Check Engine light on the dashboard in my car. It is warning me that something is wrong and that something within the car needs attention. The red flag functions in the same way. It is an internal warning that something is wrong and needs immediate attention. Recognizing red flags takes time, and it takes the ability to objectify why I am feeling what I am feeling. If I am feeling vulnerable and abandoned, what is it that caused me to feel this way. What just happened?

Needless to say, there is a tremendous measure of discipline required to objectify a red flag moment. Because most of us are prone to attach addictively to habits, it is a God-given (and learned) outpouring measure of grace that enables us to stop, take a breath, and figure out what I'm feeling and why.

I've never been good at slowing down, and this step presented the greatest challenge to me as I walked through the healing process. I was always well involved in a porn binge BEFORE I even knew that a red flag had shown itself.

There is a good deal of self-control that is required when this warning sign presents itself, and it is the Holy Spirit that works within us to strengthen us in that area of our lives. According to the Word of God, self-control is a fruit of the Spirit that will grow as we grow. It is like a muscle that has to be exercised in order for it to function the way it is supposed to function. With that said, we cannot use our human weakness as an excuse for sin. As this "muscle" is growing within us, there is another aspect of our lives that has to come to play as we develop in Christ.

Human will and self-control walk hand in hand with each other and as the Spirit of God works within us to perfect us, I believe it is the Lord's expectation that we allow our human will carry us through the dark times as our self-control is being perfected. What does this mean? It means that we have to adapt to the practice of saying NO when our bodies, minds and hormones rage against us. Somewhere along the way, we are going to have to say NO, and learn to fight through what we crave. The more we say NO, the more self-control grows within us. Say NO once, and I guarantee it will be easier to say NO each time temptation presents itself.

Are we always successful in this fight? No! Probably not, but this is where the Grace of God comes in. On those occasions when we do fall, He is big enough to absorb the hurt, pain and shame. If we come back in repentance, He will put us back on our feet and enable us to move forward without condemnation. He knows the cycle that has to be broken in our lives and He is well aware of the withdrawal we experience when we start to take back the areas of our lives that the enemy has tried to defeat us.

Practical Steps

When a *Red Flag* presents itself, there is very little time before we will cross over into the next phase of addiction, called the *Reflex*. Because this is so, there are some practical steps we can take to plan ahead and attempt to avoid a fall.

- **Get Your Bearings** – Stop and breathe – Remember **BY HIS POWER, you are in control**. Try to determine what happened that set off the Red Flag. Are you tired, hungry, hurt, lonely depressed. What triggered the current mood you are in? Remember, at the root of all our struggles is a legitimate need that is seeking to be met. Ask the Lord what need this Red Flag is pointing to.
- **Use the Word of God to Beat Down the Enemy** – Take authority over your mind and thoughts. Declare the scriptures over your situation/temptation and resist the flesh in the Name of Jesus – If you don't know what scriptures apply, look these up and write them down in an easily accessible place.

I Cor. 10:13, Heb. 2:18, Heb. 4:15, Jas. 1:13

- **Determine to say NO** - and trust the Lord to give you the power to stand in it. When the three Hebrew children were threatened with being thrown into the furnace, they fiercely stood in their decision to not bow down to the idol that had been set up. When they faced the consequence of their NO and were thrown into the furnace, they were met in the fire by the One who had the power to deliver them from the flames. We aren't victorious because we side step trials and temptation, we get strong because we find God's power available when we face them head-on.
- **Talk To Someone** – No one makes it through any addictive behavior alone. We need a trusted other person to share our hearts with. Nothing cuts through the attack of the enemy quite like verbalizing our struggles. When you drag your feelings, emotions and desires out of the darkness, you disable the satanic power behind the attack. Stay silent and you'll fortify the enemy's stronghold in your life.
- **Be Honest With God** – Let Him know what you are feeling and the pain that it's causing you. There is a lot of healing in just being able to candidly verbalize yourself to the Lord. True, what you feel might be ugly and "unchristian", but He is big enough and loving enough to handle it without judging you.

- **Continue to Walk in Your Desire for Purity and Freedom** – Sometimes you'll win the battle and sometimes your weakness will win out. It's all part of learning to walk with Him in the midst of our brokenness. If you fall, don't give up the ship! The Lord is still there, full of mercy and compassion ready to pick you up and move you forward.

Andrew Comiskey, Living Waters (manual), (International Copyright: Desert Stream Publishing, 1996), 196-197