



Understanding the Cycle of Sexual Addiction

Part II – Reflexive Responses

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)

In part one of the article, I shared a quote from author Andy Comiskey that sheds 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*

Andy’s teaching goes on to identify the three stages of the Addictive cycle which are: *Red Flags*, *Reflexive Response*, and *Ritualization*. As I stated in the previous article, my goal is to elaborate on how these stages look and feel, and how they have played themselves out in my walk with the Lord.

If a *Red Flag* is not dealt with, it will give way to the *Reflex* stage of the cycle. Simply put, *“I have decided on a plan to deal with my hurtful reality, and the Lord may or may not be a part of it.”* In other words, I am going to choose between God’s way of dealing with my pain and hurt, or I am going to choose a pleasurable release that will drive me deeper into my patterns of addiction.

Three key points to consider about the Reflex stage:

1. The Reflex stage is where decisions are made. This is where we will respond to the Red Flag that has been thrown in front of us. Pain and vulnerability will be at their highest levels within us, so “feelings” are not something that can be trusted or brought into the equation.
2. From a psychological perspective, there are mere seconds that elapse between the Red Flag being presented and the Reflexive Response. When a Red Flag hits, there is no time to second guess the right thing to do. In those seconds, you will either choose God or what Living Waters calls your *“object of lesser desire”*, and you will begin to plot your course of action from there.
3. Following God’s way will always involve some type of pain and self-discipline. We have a choice to either bring that pain to the Cross of Christ and find His release, or we will deal with the pain in an illicit manner and suffer through the consequences of our actions.

Real Life Example

My Red Flag

Many years ago, I was working in a great job that I loved and was about to be interviewed for a promotion within the company. The initial interview went well and I was convinced the position was mine (after being told as much by the recruiter). On the day the hiring decision was made, a brand new corporate policy went into effect and prevented me from being offered the position. As all of this was being explained to me, I could feel the RAGE boiling up in me. I left the recruiting office feeling used, worthless and rejected. Since I didn't know the Lord at this point in my life, the logical next step was to plot out a way to ease the sense of worthlessness and rejection that I felt.

My Reflex

With nowhere else to go, I began to plot out a course that I perceived would make me feel better and take away the pain. Since I already had issues with alcohol, and was struggling with my sexual identity, I made a decision, that the best remedy for the way I felt, was to go to a gay bar, get drunk (or find someone with drugs or both), go home with the first person that showed an interest, and party the night away.

You could build an argument at this point and say, *"Well, of course this would be your reaction, you didn't know the Lord!"* Very true! However, there are many men and women who DO know the Lord, struggle with the same Red Flags and the same Reflex over and over again. The only difference is the "drug" of choice.

Can It Really Be Different?

IT CAN BE DIFFERENT! Jesus can make us new! The key is being willing to lay down everything (every sin, habit and addiction) that stands in our way, and look for God to empower us through His Word and by His Spirit. There is no need to babble and beg our way through prayer time, and try to convince God to heal us. All it takes is a single-hearted determination that your life is going to be different, and living in the measure of His Word that you already know. Then, trust Him to empower you, and teach you what you don't know.

By developing an intimacy with the Lord and standing on the Word of God, the above scenario I described could have a radically different outcome. Filled with the Word of God and walking in righteous choice making, our struggle has the potential to end before it leaves the Reflex stage.

Pain will arise when we refuse the addictive release. Previous addictive cycles have had a physiological impact on our bodies. We actually program ourselves with specific responses to pain, and in doing so, chemicals are released in our brains that cause us to expect the sexual release (or whatever ritual we've programmed ourselves with). When we deny the body and mind what it has come to expect, a pain and suffering is produced. The pain and struggle against sin can be an opportunity to get to know God in a deeper way if you allow it to.

In my suffering times, it helped me to know that God was there. He was watching, waiting and empowering me by His Spirit to bring the suffering to Him. I had to reckon with the fact that there was no habit or release, that I could find for myself that was going to help me to feel better about myself. The truth is, that once I got the Reflex under control, the more I was able to objectify why I struggled

with feeling used, worthless and rejected. I didn't need to face my pain by using a sexualized response. I needed the Lord to bring me to the root of why I felt the way I did, and help me to see me the way He saw me.

In Part I, I shared a few practical helps for walking through the Red Flag stage of addiction. They also work in the Reflex stage so give them a try. In addition to those steps, here are a few more:

GOD AND OTHERS

Your focus should always be on the Lord who gave His life to set you free. He knows (and He wants you to know) that you won't make it on your own. Rather than healing being a totally supernatural experience, He will provide others for you to help work you through your struggles. Remember that addiction thrives in the darkness. Suffering in silence fortifies the work of the enemy in your life. Find someone you can trust, open your mouth in confession, and bring your struggles into the light of day.

DON'T HIDE UNDER A RELIGIOUS MASK

For people who already know the Lord, a struggle with any type of addiction can be humiliating. Sometimes, it seems like it's more difficult for Christians to find grace in their time of need, than it is for those whose struggles drive them to a salvation experience. Don't hide! Whether we are in the throes of addictive behavior before or after our salvation experience, makes no difference. God knows it all! *"While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8)* Because we are trusting Christ for our eternal salvation, this doesn't mean we won't fall into sin. In fact, issues with addiction usually intensify after one has been a Christian for awhile. There is no shame or condemnation in Christ! When you fall, if you come to Him with a sincere heart of repentance, He will forgive you and set you on your feet again. *"...though the righteous fall seven times, they rise again...." (Proverbs 24:16).*

My pet peeve is religious lingo and Christian catch phrases that people use to cover the real needs they have inside their hearts. No matter how many times you "claim victory in the name of Jesus" over a sin and habit, the proof is in the way you live and the fruit that exists in your life.

Years ago, I had a woman leave Living Waters because she was offended by a statement I made. During the course of a lesson, I made mention of the fact that sometimes Christians invoke the "blood of Jesus" and "stand in the victory" as a smoke screen to hide what is really going on in their lives. I explained that while it's true the blood of Jesus is powerful in our lives and sets us free from sin, we still have to deal with the psychological damage we've caused ourselves as we pursued sin. It's not enough to say "I struggled with _____, but that's under the blood." We have to drag our hurts, pains, secrets, habits and addictions into the light over and over. Spouting spiritual catch-phrases "in faith" (and being weird about it) is not all that's required to find freedom and victory. She apparently didn't like my take on the issue and was gone by the next session.

Let's be clear: YES, IT'S TRUE - *"the Blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son sets us free from sin."* YES, we do stand in His victory in setting us free from sin, but we don't stop there. Once sin is broken and we look to Jesus for forgiveness, we take the next step in the process. We HAVE TO go on to discover what led us to making the choices we made, deal with the root issues that led us there, and find out who we truly are in Christ. That is the freedom that Christ died to give us. Don't accept any imitations!

OWN AND UNDERSTAND YOUR NEEDS

The need for love, acceptance and affirmation has been placed within us by God the Father. His intention is that HE, HIMSELF will meet those needs. Sin has driven us to meet those needs on our own and that's where we get into trouble. He has fixed His heart of love on you and I. We need to practice the holy discipline of fixing our eyes and our hearts on Him. No one was ever set free because they sought FREEDOM. Freedom from the broken areas in our lives comes from seeking the Lord and growing closer to Him. We walk free, when we turn our heart and our passion toward seeking and following Him.

FIND AN ALTERNATIVE TO YOUR ADDICTION WHILE BREAKING THROUGH YOUR ADDICTION

Not long ago, I read the testimony of a man who was struggling with a porn addiction. He struggled back in the days before porn was readily available on the internet. He shared how he would get into his car to drive to an adult bookstore, and then struggle with his conscience while en route. The first few times he set out for the adult bookstore, he wound up there. He always left feeling worse than when he had arrived.

One night, instead of going to the bookstore to look at porn, he made a decision to go to the ice cream shop on the next block. He said the first time he by-passed the bookstore, he had a small sense of victory that took hold of him. From that point on, whenever he was tempted to go to the adult store, he would go to the next block and buy ice cream instead. In time, those small victories showed him that he really did have the power to control what he did and where he went. In a very short period of time, the desire to go to the bookstore lessened, and he was able to break out of the pattern he had established.

Please understand, I am not saying that we should trade the addiction to porn for the addiction to food. What I am saying is, I'm sure the Holy Spirit was behind every trip to the ice cream shop, and gave this man the power to starve off the addiction to porn. He found a non-erotic replacement for his habit which enabled him to come to a place of sobriety. A healthy alternative can make a world of difference, as we transition through different phases of healing.

¹ Andrew Comiskey, *Living Waters (manual)*, (International Copyright: Desert Stream Publishing, 1996), 196-197