

I have been asked to address the difficult subject of pornography. As I prepared this message, I reflected on the sermons I've heard over the years and realized that I have learned next to nothing of lasting value from sermons on porn.

I once visited a church and the pastor delivered a fiery sermon against porn. Everyone was crying, weeping, committing to purity. But later on we learned how the pastor himself was actively using porn, and had left both his family and his church for a same-sex relationship. There was a direct and devastating connection between this pastor's *porn habit* and the unravelling of his personal life.

You see, hypocrisy is a real threat, not only to the image of the church. Hypocrisy threatens to destroy the faith of the church from within.

From what I've learned, the evangelical church has a problem with pornography. 68% of church-going men and over 50% of pastors view porn on a regular basis. Of young Christian adults 18-24 years old, 76% actively search for porn.

Based on these statistics, I think we need a dose of realism. Porn is crippling the church.

So as we proceed, I want to acknowledge the sensitivity of the issue. I imagine many people here today are personally affected by pornography, or have been in the past. That's why I want approach this subject with gentleness, encouraging, and urging us to live in a way that is worthy of God.

At the same time, I believe the issue of porn is a gospel issue. As a church, we need to understand what's at stake here, and how our attitude and relation to porn affects the very heart and essence of the Christian religion.

Let us pray:

The first thing I want to say is, I get that pornography is embarrassing to talk about. I did not invite my mother to hear me preach today.

To a large degree, pornography is taboo. It is "*ne touche pas.*"

Culturally it is acceptable to use porn, but it is culturally unacceptable to talk about it.

But did you know that the porn industry makes more money than Major League Baseball, the NFL and the NBA combined? Porn sites get more visitors each month than Netflix, Amazon and Twitter put together!

So understand that, in our culture, porn is a bigger economic influencer than sports. Consider how, culturally speaking, we are conditioned from childhood to appreciate sports!

If this is true, could it also be true that our culture predisposes and encourages us to consume pornography?

Pornography is like the Old Tobacco. It's everywhere. People are using pornography without even suspecting how it might harm them, and that is why we need to have this conversation.

The verdict is out: medical experts tell us that pornography has a dramatic effect on our health. Porn changes your brain chemistry. Porn diminishes your ability to enjoy life, relationships, and even sex. If you are male, pornography is connected to erectile dysfunction and even impotency. But there's a more corrosive influence on society that is largely underreported. Pornography is fuelling the epidemic of anxiety and depression. Pornography is contributing to marital infidelity and divorce, creating broken marriages. Even when porn doesn't break a marriage, its effects are devastating. I read one study that shows how women who discover their husband's porn addiction often suffer from PTSD as a result. In young people, not only does porn lead to warped views of healthy sexuality, but it often leads to promiscuity, STI's, and other risky behaviour.

Because porn has the ability to alter sexual desire, it opens the door to sexual perversion, dangerous and violent sexual activity, bestiality, and other ghastly crimes.

According to the Associated Press in 2019, "more than a dozen US states have moved to declare pornography a public health crisis."

Consider how porn has filtered down through Hollywood into mainstream music and television.

Major box-office productions such as Game of Thrones are, by definition, pornographic. From a pastoral perspective, the distinction between soft porn and hard porn is completely artificial. A lot of women would be upset if they caught their husband watching porn, but it was a predominately female audience that made the movie 50 Shades of Grey the success that it was. Thanks to men *and* women, violent pornography is now mainstream.

We live in such a hyper sexual culture that what used to be considered pornography is now called advertising. I went for a walk through the Eaton Centre the other day, and I tell you, the things you'll see. All of us, male and female, young and old, are being targeted, influenced, and desensitized to porn on a near-daily basis.

The second thing I want to say is, I'm not convinced the church always sends the right message.

We live in a culture that prioritizes health and wellness. Exercise, eating right, mental health—these are important. But our cultural obsession with health and wellness has influenced the church, so that when we think of sin and purity, we think in categories of health and wellness. We even think of food theologically. You can go to Metro and buy “vanilla chocolate temptation ice cream,” or “heavenly hash.” Sweet Jesus is the name of an ice cream parlor.

We now think about what is good and bad, healthy and sinful, with respect to personal preference. The trouble is, if we consider pornography to be only mildly harmful, and if we think of harm in dietary terms, then where's the harm? It's kind of like eating vanilla chocolate temptation ice cream. It won't hurt my diet if I eat just a little—it's my cheat day, after all?

We've been sedated by the sexual permissiveness of our culture. And then we live out the Christian life of resistance to sin from a dietary framework that is spiritually ineffective.

The Christian holy war against sin is a fight for purity. But in our culture, purity is an adjective we use to describe bottled drinking water and facial soap.

What's missing in evangelical culture is a sense of justice. Because this sense of justice is missing, because our fight against sin is often just another fad diet, we're losing ground to the enemy. Sin is transgression. It is a violation of divine law incurring guilt. Sin is spiritual and moral wickedness leading to death.

My goal today, then, is to show you how using pornography is a matter of life and death, both physical death and spiritual death.

Hear me out. Last year there was a lot of talk about pornography in the news after five young porn stars tragically took their own lives over the course of a three-month period. 23-year-old August Ames, originally from Nova Scotia, was one of them. This story is absolutely heartbreaking.

I was actually debating whether I should leave this out and cut directly to the sermon text. The thing is, I don't want to talk about porn in the abstract. We need to put names on this, because it's deeply personal.

For what it's worth, August was a kind of celebrity in the adult film world. She had received the porn equivalent of the Oscar Award, her husband was an executive film producer, and she was at the pinnacle of what could be described as a very successful and prominent career.

August was the poster-girl of the so-called legitimate, legal, and regulated porn world. That's why the news of her death came as such a shock. In December of 2017, August made a provocative post to her public Twitter:

“Whichever (lady) performer is replacing me tomorrow for @EroticaXNews, you're shooting with a guy who has shot gay porn, just to let cha know. BS is all I can say... Do agents really not care about who they're representing?... I do my homework for my body”

You see, when August learned that she was scheduled to perform with a male actor who had previously shot gay porn, she went online to alert other actresses, because this information was allegedly concealed from her, and she feared that other women deserve the right to know who they're having sex with. In response to her tweet, scores of people from within the porn industry publicly condemned August as homophobic and bigoted. Three days later, she was dead.

The Rolling Stones magazine is right to point out that this was a criminal instance of cyber bullying. For many others, August's death exposed the need for greater mental health awareness and even the need to combat the stigma about homosexuality and HIV.

But this is to miss the forest for the trees. The horrifying reality is that August, one of the most celebrated professionals in the porn industry was condemned in full-view of the public for not having sex with someone she did not want to have sex with.

Ordinary speaking, if a woman is subjected to non-consensual sex, we call it rape. But if a female porn star says no to unwanted sex, it is offensive.

August was publicly disciplined and harassed for raising questions about who she was scheduled to *schtup*.

The hypocrisy of the pornography industry says that women are free to do what they like with their bodies; they are free to earn a living like this, if they choose.

But August tells us the truth. She asserted what was left of her thin personal boundaries at the cost of her life. At the end of the day, August died because she felt like she had no escape. *This is what porn normally feels like to women—it's the feeling of having no escape.*

In my research I learned that it's common for women in porn to break down crying in a middle of a shoot on account of the intense psychological and physical trauma they endure, even if they want to be there. These women are comforted for a moment, and then encouraged to finish the job, despite their physical and emotional revulsion. Porn turns these men and women into slaves.

We're going to watch a brief clip from *Fight the New Drug*, a secular research organization that publishes peer reviewed content about the harm of porn. —Watch clip

If you've spent any time downtown, you'll know that just north of the Eaton centre next to Ryerson University and where the Scott Mission used to stand, there's a strip club called Zanzibar.

Does anyone know about Zanzibar? Zanzibar is a world heritage city on the coast of Tanzania in East Africa. Historically Zanzibar is known for being the site of the world's last open slave market. That's right, the strip club in downtown Toronto has a slave port as its namesake. Connect the dots.

With this in mind, open your bibles to 1 Thessalonians 4. In this passage, Paul reminds the church of how we ought to be living in order to please God. Paul writes, "we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus."

Sometimes Paul gives good advice. But in this instance, Paul wants us to know, this isn't just his opinion. This is not just some ancient near eastern or Greco-Roman social construct. What Paul is passing down is a holy tradition—a deposit of teaching—that comes from Jesus himself with the full weight of divine authority directed to all Christians in all places for all time.

He continues: “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified, that you should avoid sexuality immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body, in a way that is holy and honourable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God, and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister.”

People often wonder, what is God’s will for my life? We often think about the will of God as personal destiny. Where should I work? What grad school should I apply to? Where should I buy my next condo? These questions are certainly important. But when Paul speaks of the will of God here, there is no ambiguity.

“It is God’s will that you should be sanctified.” The underlying Greek word here is ἁγιασμός, which means holiness. A holy and sanctified life is a life that is entirely devoted to Jesus Christ. To be holy is to be set apart from the world. Holiness is freedom from the corrupting influence of sin. But it’s more than the absence of sinning. Holiness is the freedom to love God in purity and blamelessness.

The best part of Christian holiness is that it’s never something we pursue on our own. Holiness is the healing of our spirit, soul, and body that comes from God as a gift when place our trust in the crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 2:24 says, “Christ suffered for you... He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.”

Out of love for you and me, Jesus went to the cross to endure our sin and death, so that we don’t have to.

Jesus saw our sin of pornography, rape and human trafficking for what it truly is—a darkness we are incapable of fully understanding—and embraced our sin by his death. Because Jesus takes our sin upon himself, he death on the cross enables us to put our sin behind us. Jesus dies to take our sin, and he rises from the grave to give us new life.

The gift of God in Jesus Christ is holiness. Holiness is a right relationship with God, but it is also a right relationship with God’s holy people. As we put our trust in Jesus through the washing of baptism, we are incorporated into the life the church, which is Christ’s body. To be holy is to belong to Christ’s church.

Now this relational gift and membership in holiness necessarily involves the transformation of our life and character. God says, be holy as I am holy. Holiness is the shape of our life as we grow in obedience to God’s instructions.

Let's consider what this looks like. Paul tells us that holiness means saying no to sexual immorality.

Forgive me for quoting Greek words. I'm not trying to sound intellectual, but I want you to see this. In the Greek, the word for sexual immorality is *porneia*. Sound familiar? The English word pornography comes from the Greek word *porneia*.

It's as if Paul is saying, the will of God is your holiness, and the will of God is that you avoid porn. Paul continues. The will of God involves learning to control your bodies in a way that is holy and honorable.

Being self-controlled is contrast with the lifestyle of the pagan world that doesn't know God. The pagan world is characterized by passionate lust. Lust is not the same thing as finding someone attractive or beautiful. Lust is the almost magnetic sexual attraction that excites the sexual organs. Lust happens whenever we choose to entertain our fantasies, deriving pleasure and pursuing the pleasure of sexual appetite.

Passionate lust is very strong language for Paul to use. Passion comes from the greek *pathos*. Pathos is everything today. If someone is passionate, that's a good thing.

But Paul says we need to hold our lust in check. The desires of the flesh are worldly. The inordinate cravings of the flesh for sex are an abyss of desire, a bottomless pit. These longings need to be under control, otherwise we will be controlled by our desires. This is part of what it means to know God — to be self-controlled.

Paul goes further. Immorality is not just the absence of self-control. Immorality is not passive, it's active. Verse 6 says, "in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister."

On the hand, we're being told to practice self control. On the other hand, we're told to observe healthy boundaries. With respect to *porneia*, we cannot transgress one another.

In the Christian scriptures, anything that can be positively described as sexual immorality falls under the category of unlawful behaviour or transgression: Sex outside of marriage between opposite sexed partners, which is fornication and prostitution; adultery, which is sexual activity with someone who married to someone else; same-sex relationships, even when they are recognized by civil authorities, are considered immoral; and lust, even apart from the physical sex act, is a form of impurity.

Paul brings all these behaviours under the banner of exploitation. This would have come as a challenge to the Thessalonians, as it comes as challenge to us here today. Virtually all of these behaviours are encouraged by the culture.

Marriage is not held in high regard today. Even if marriage is seen as something one should strive for, sex outside of marriage is generally seen as healthy and normal.

But for Paul, consensual sexual activity among adults doesn't magically erase divine boundaries. To engage in porneia is fraud. Porneia is cheating.

Let me be clear, sexual immorality is not just wrong with respect to a future marriage. Do you understand that? If you're having sex with a boyfriend or girlfriend, and you hope to be married, but you end up marrying someone else down the road, you bring your sexual history into the marriage. Some Christians think of the transgression of immorality with respect to this future spouse. While this might make sense in certain honour bound cultures, I think this misses the point.

Pope John Paul II speaks of lust as *dehumanizing desire*. The problem with our sinful human hearts—the problem of immorality—is the sin of objectifying a human being created in the image and likeness of God, setting aside their dignity as persons, and treating them as objects of pleasure. The transgression of immorality is to objectify a human being for whom Jesus Christ laid down his life.

By the way, this is why pornography is wrong even between married partners. Pornography is a fundamentally exploitative phenomenon because it *always* reduces human beings to play things.

Porn removes the sex act from the conjugal relationship as an illicit imitation of the God-given intimacy and goodness of sex within marriage, which is a picture of Christ and his Church.

To consume porn is to gratify one's sexual desire by profiting from someone else's transgression of the commandment against adultery and fornication. I haven't even mentioned the harm of masturbation, which is typically a thing!

Can you imagine how horrifying a crime it would be if someone was violently raped, and then masterbated over?

That's porn. Every time.

Even with the most legitimate or ethical porn, if there is such a thing, it still comes down to exploitation and abuse. Porn objectifies men and women for the sexual satisfaction of a paying audience. We're talking about victims! These men and women are dehumanized and broken. Think of their poverty, often literally. Drugs are inevitable part of the equation, because you need drugs to feel better about yourself in that situation. There's low self-esteem and all manners of mental health issues.

Animals do not treat each other this way. Therefore porn is one of the worst forms of modern slavery.

There's simply no other way to parse it.

By the way, the same word Paul uses to describe taking advantage of someone (πλεονεκτέω) is the same word used to describe a greedy person whose ways are judged to be extremely sinful.

In 1 Corinthians 5:11, Paul orders the church “you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolator or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people.”

Consider how greed, passion, and lust all flow out of porneia.

Paul continues: “The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.”

The Lord will punish. This is a gospel promise.

Christians will often say with big smiles, we must stand on all the promises of God! But what about all the promises of God to punish and cut off his people who persistently, willfully disobey?

This is why I believe pornography is a gospel issue. How we respond to this crisis defines whether or not we believe the gospel, if we even have the gospel!

You see, we cannot possess the true and life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ—the forgiveness of sins, the kingdom of God, and life everlasting—if we think the gospel means freedom from sin *for us*, but *not freedom from captivity for others*.

Isaiah 61 describes the gospel as *freedom for the captives, and release from darkness for the prisoners, the proclamation of the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God.*”

The gospel is good news for the poor, for the oppressed, for slaves, and addicts.

The gospel promises liberation from realm of sin and death into the kingdom of light.

Look at Kanye West and his wife Kim Kardashian. Kanye and Kim were once sex-icons. But in the last year, Kanye and Kim were arrested by the gospel.

Now Kanye openly talks about how he has made the decision to put his porn addiction behind him.

In his own words, “From age 5, to now having to kick the habit. And it just presents itself in the open, like its OK. And I stand up and say, you know, it’s not OK... with God, I’ve been able to beat things that had a full control of me.”

Or what about Brittni De La Mora, a former porn star who now works as a pastor with the XXXchurch in California, a church that focuses on impacting the porn industry with the gospel. I saw an interview with Brittni where she told of how after she became a Christian there was period where she went back into porn after at the direction of a pimp who was a lapsed Christian.

Can you imagine that Brittni could be any one of us here? Porn is not anonymous. It affects your neighbours, even your Christian neighbour.

That is why we at Liberty Grace are committed to the life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ.

The truth is that Jesus loves you, and wants to set you free.

If you struggle with addiction to porn, there is hope. This can be defeated. The pastors are here to listen. We want to help you have open and honest relationships with other Christians so you can put this behind you forever.

You should know there are computer software programs we can help you put in place to safeguard against the temptation. We are here to pray with you, to provide accountability, and even to direct you to counselling and medical care if necessary.

By God’s mercy, you will be set free!

This brings me to my last point. The good news of the gospel is freedom from captivity, **not freedom to sexually exploit captives.**

If you use your freedom in Christ to enjoy pornography without resistance, you are not living in step with the gospel.

Proverbs 11:3 says, “the integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity.”

If the gospel is good news for the prisoner and oppressed, then any Christian who makes the conscience, informed, and habitual choice to participate in porn, makes the decision to live as an enemy of the cross of Christ.

Holiness is not optional for the Christian. We either accept the teaching of Christ and put off immorality, or we reject Christ’s word by gratifying the flesh.

This is what 1 Thessalonians 4:18 says: “Anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.”

A Christian cannot continue in the sin of pornography. It’s not an everyday sin, it’s grave and mortal!

While Jesus is at work rescuing men, women, and children out of the slavery of sex trafficking, one cannot claim to be a Christian while keeping God’s children in slavery. When you use porn, you are perpetuating the problem. In fact, to use porn is to become morally culpable for the very sins you enjoy watching other people do.

I want to acknowledge that *relapse happens. I get it.* If you’re making a concerted effort to quit porn, and you succumb to temptation, the grace of God is sufficient to cover the acts of the flesh. But given the serious nature and unique harm of pornography, consider what James 5:15 says, “confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.”

There is a real sense in which progress in the Christian life comes through *obeying Christ’s commands. Grace is not odds with effort. In fact, God’s grace enables us to make every effort in holiness. Therefore, the struggling Christian must avail himself of every possible help and support in the church until complete victory is gained.*

For one, this means that Christians who use porn simply must confess. There is absolutely zero shame in the act of confession. We are all sinners saved by grace, so when we confess our sins, Christ’s strength is made perfect in us. And there’s good biblical evidence that our healing is in fact conditional upon our confession.

Secondly, it means that we who are *not given to pornography cannot shame the addicts*. We cannot have such a puritanical church culture that people are afraid to talk about their struggles. If we do that, no one will come to church because we all fall short in one way or another. We who are strong need to show grace and mercy to those who are weak, extending compassion, and only when absolutely necessary, extending judgement.

But there is a third category of people I need to address, and this third category includes a lot of pastors and Christian leaders for whom pornography is a lifestyle. If this is you, heed this warning.

James 4:4 says, “you adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.”

If you are a Christian leader who continues to use porn, you cannot promise others freedom while you yourself are a slave of depravity. If your eyes are full of lust, your confession is empty! You should be tormented by society’s lawlessness. But you’re bringing immorality into the church from the top-down!

If you’re a pastor who uses porn, you need to confess your sins to your accountability structure, and step aside. So, press pause and get help. Let’s be clear on this. Porn is disqualifying, plain and simple.

Whenever a pastor is secretly immoral, their actions bring destructive heresies into the church. A pastor with an unchecked porn habit should not be a pastor. Look, some will say, pastors have struggles. We need to show pastors grace. I agree. The thing is, 2 Peter chapter 2, characterizes false teachers by their conduct, not just their teachings. For too long, the church has been soft on this. But the Scriptures are anything but soft. Pornography and other forms of sexual immorality are the hallmark of spiritual wickedness. “Many will follow their depraved conduct and will bring the way of truth into disrepute.”

Let’s pray. **May God strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. Amen.**