

Three Fire Breaks For Sexual Purity

It is said that in the average group of gathered men today, 70% of them will have viewed some kind of pornography in the previous week. That is not some wild statistic, but a statistic which has been demonstrated in several tests and survey. The problem of impurity is a growing one. D.A. Carson remarked that young men are coming into churches with their minds completely disordered by pornography, and requiring extensive discipleship to get them to even grasp the idea of true marital love.

Amongst pastors, Internet pornography use is at frightening levels, while in the pew, it goes no better. It is hardly blinked at in evangelical churches for the members to watch movies with explicit sex, nudity, while suggestive comedy is not even blinked at. Overall, the battle against impurity seems to be one that the church is losing. An absolute avalanche of suggestive and provocative images now pours upon people from movies, TV, music videos, the Internet, cellphones, magazines, billboards, not to mention the way people dress in real life. Few men are coming out of this tsunami of sexual imagery and temptation unscathed. Few Christian men are doing so either.

How are we to battle and overcome this giant of lust and sexual temptation?

Fire-fighters have various methods for fighting fires. One of them is to burn or cut down trees ahead of the fire. That way, when the fire reaches that point, it has no more fuel to burn and can't go any further. When it comes to the matter of purity in sexuality, the Bible reveals not one but several ways of fighting sin. I think we can group them into three areas, almost like three fire breaks. If temptation gets past the first one, it should get stopped by the second. If it gets past the second it should get stopped by the third. The three areas are: firstly, the affections, secondly the daily battle against sin and third the rescue rope of accountability and consequences.

Now I'd like to take that list and work backwards. The reason for doing so is I'd like to end with the first fire-break which ought to be the strongest. The third and final kind of defence is not the strongest kind. It is simply the most drastic, and the last line of defence.

So let's start by considering the last fire-break which we should build into our lives which is the **Rescue Rope of Accountability and Consequences.**

Sometimes I will hear Christians say something like, "I do not want to repent of my sins merely because of the bad consequences that come from those sins. I want to repent of my sins because I love the Lord." And they are right for wanting that to be their chief motive in life. The truth is, that kind of thing is what drives us on our best days, not on our worst days. On our worst days, when we are least spiritual, and thinking the least about spiritual things, our love for God is exactly what has failed. To depend only upon your love for God is simply an unrealistic view of self. There are times when a combination of things and choices leads us to be cold in our affections, prone to temptation and neglectful of the spiritual disciplines we need. On such days what we need is the final fire-break of Accountability and Consequences.

What does this mean? This is where we come face to face with the reality of what we might lose if we give in to temptation. And since sin is by nature deceptive, we make sure there is another brother in Christ at this point waiting to ask us the hard questions.

One of the problems with sexual sin is that it thrives on fantasy. The whole thing becomes unreal and fantastical. As a man lives in this fantasy world, he tends to become more and more convinced

that this is his own private sin and it isn't ultimately a problem for anyone else. He rationalises. He explains it away. His deceitful heart finds all kinds of reasons why it is OK. Furthermore, the guilt produced by sexual sin means that a man is all the more prone to be in a cycle of secret sin. That is, he sins, chides himself, wonders if he is the only Christian man who sins in this fashion, decides that all the others seem fine, therefore he chooses to live with his secret sin. After a period of guilt-induced abstinence, he returns to the sin, and the cycle begins all over. With this kind of phenomenon taking place, the final fire break is to have someone external to you call you on your life. This kind of accountability is encouraged and called for in Scripture

James 5:19-20 ¹⁹ ¶ *Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back,* ²⁰ *let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.*

Galatians 6:1 *Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.*

Proverbs 27:5-6 *Open rebuke is better Than love carefully concealed.* ⁶ *Faithful are the wounds of a friend, But the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.*

Now this might take many forms. For the problem of Internet porn, there are not simply filters, but accountability programs which email someone if you visit a questionable site.

If you are frequently travelling, it is wise to decide what your policy with the hotel TV will be. Have someone who you can phone or will phone you to ask what you watched. Mostly, it is having someone who can ask you the hardest questions: How is your personal walk with God? Where is Satan tempting you at the moment? But here's the catch: you have to set this up in your life. Aside from diligent pastors, few people are going to have the temerity to ask you about your spiritual life. You will have to build up a relationship with another man, who will hold you to the standard of Scripture. That means that you have to have a realistic picture of your own sin nature. You have to know that at some point, it will come to this. At some point, I will have crossed the other two barriers, and I need something there. In fact, the very fact that you know there is a third barrier is often what keeps you back. It is not that your accountability partner calls you only when you are in trouble. Simply having that in your life can keep you far back from even approaching the need for it. But, in order to have this kind of relationship in your life, you must be aware that your sinful nature needs this very thing.

1 Corinthians 10:12 ¹² *Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.*

Relationships like this don't happen overnight. Furthermore, you have to choose the kind of man who will not condone sin, but at the same time show the appropriate compassion. He needs to be the kind of man who confronts you with the scary question: what would you lose if you went ahead with this and it was revealed? Think of your family- your marriage, your children. Think of your ministry. Think of your church, and all the people you have influenced. Think of the name of Christ and the reputation of Christianity at large. That kind of loss question snaps you out of the fantasy world of pleasure and makes you peer over the cliff.

Once again, you say the fear of what I might lose isn't a very noble motive. No, it's not the best motive. But the best motive is your motive on your best day. This is what you need on your worst day.

Moving backwards, we come to the second fire-break, which we could call the daily battle against sin. If the third fire-break is a rescue rope, then this is the **Middle Wall of Maintenance**. It is an

ongoing work of patching cracks as they occur, adding another brick, continually building the defences against sinful temptation. This is the ongoing work of keeping certain thoughts out of our minds, minimising temptation, and avoiding what will cause us to fall. Think of sexual temptation like an ongoing rainstorm. To keep your house from rain damage, you need to keep doing maintenance.

There are at least three ways that the Bible calls us to do this.

- 1) Make the covenant with your eyes. Your eyes, and the imaginations that come from your eyes are the fuel and fire of sexual temptation. So Job said, Job 31:1 *Job 31:1 "I have made a covenant with my eyes; Why then should I look upon a young woman? What does that mean? Job made a stern agreement with himself, that he would not feed himself longing looks at anyone except his wife. He knew what Jesus would later explain in detail: Matthew 5:28²⁸ "But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*
- 2) So the first attitude is the attitude of fleeing temptation. One speaker I heard said that he practised bouncing his eyes off a provocatively dressed woman or even sensuous images on magazines, billboards or TV screens. If he would see it, he learned not to linger but he would simply bounce his eyes off and let the land elsewhere. In his words, "I look away, I turn away, I walk away". That's fleeing temptation. That's avoiding all appearance of evil. Before the thoughts can even incubate, you have stopped them. You have taken your thoughts captive to the obedience of Jesus Christ. For those of you who are married, we should think in terms of starving our eyes of the world's offerings and saving them for our wives. If we choose to rest our eyes upon the fantasy images of beauty around us, we will have little joy or desire left for our wives.
- 3) Plan not to sin. That might sound strange at first. Who plans to sin? Well, many do, but let's assume we're talking about a God-fearing Christian who doesn't plan to sin. The problem is, that doesn't go far enough. You cannot merely don't plan to sin, you must plan *not* to sin. You must plan your life so as to minimise your encounters with temptation. When Solomon described the foolish young man who was ensnared by the adulterous woman, the key verse in *Proverbs 7:8* *Passing along the street near her corner; And he took the path to her house*

He did not give temptation a wide berth. He walked in the direction of temptation, naively (and half dishonestly) wondering if temptation might get him. Make no mistake, come close to temptation, and like the two opposite poles of a magnet, it will attract your sinful nature to itself and there will be little chance of resisting it. The person who is seeking to maintain a holy life and fight against sin is planning not to sin. That is the idea behind Romans 13:14 *But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.* "

To make no provision for the flesh means, do not provide the sinful nature any opportunity to seize upon. Don't make provisions for it. Don't give it the space to act. Decide ahead of time when you will be on the Internet, and who will be at home. Decide what TV programs you will watch, and what you will do if a provocative ad or trailer comes on. Decide where you will shop. What will you do when you approach the magazine rack? Have a method by which you can pick the magazine you want without browsing through all the titles present. Decide ahead of time to avoid compromising situations of being alone with a member of the opposite sex not your spouse. This is choosing to arrange your day to avoid temptation as much as possible.

- 4) Cut off what causes you to stumble. Jesus used very strong language in this regard. *Matthew 5:29 "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.* To cut off one of your body members would be painful, and debilitating. The point of that

illustration is to say, in the fight against temptation, you may need to let go of some things which are painful to let go of. It might even be that their absence in your life hinders you or hampers your life. Jesus said, rather be debilitated than condemned. Rather be slowed down, hindered, disabled than damned. In the fight against sexual sin, we must take the battle that seriously. If cellphones have become the stumbling-block, then they may need to go. "That would really make life hard!" That's the point of the illustration. If the Internet has become the stumbling-block, it may need to go. "But I do my research there, and I would be crippled without email." If travelling alone ends up being the stumbling block, you may need to give up travelling alone. "But that would make so many things difficult!" That's the point of the illustration. Rather face difficulty and grow in holiness than continue with convenience straight into destruction. That's the point of Jesus' illustration. You can live without Internet, TV, DVDs, the newspapers, magazines. You cannot live without holiness.

The day-to-day maintenance of the fight against sin is important. It is a way of putting works to the faith where we pray 'deliver us from temptation'. Here we work out what we believe. We flee, we make no provision, we amputate.

But up to now the fire-breaks have all been negative: the fear of consequences, the denial of temptation. The truth is, the greatest power over sin in our lives is not negative, but positive. The greatest commandment in the Christian life is not a negative, but a positive: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. This leads us to the first line of defence against sin, and it ought to be the strongest. It is:

The Front Line of our Affections

What we love is the most powerful defence against sin. A positive love will outlast and conquer mere negative defences. We are by nature positive creatures. We seek something to eat, not merely something to fast from. We want to go places, not merely avoid others. We want to do things, not merely abstain from other things. So the greatest power over immoral sexual desire is not merely denying the sinful indulgence of lust or by considering the painful consequences thereof, it is by loving something and someone more than the desire for illicit pleasure.

In fact, as Jonathan Edwards demonstrated, there really is no difference between our desires and our choices.. We always choose in the direction of our greatest desire. We cannot overcome one desire by simply telling it to stop. We need a desire opposite to, and greater than the evil desire. Our affections, the things we love, are the most important things about us. What we love, and how we love, are the greatest revealers of our characters.

Love God as He has told us to love Him. That implies at least four things:

- 1) **Firstly**, we must love Him more than any other thing or person. God must be supreme in our loves. We must not love anything as much as we love God.
- 2) **Second**, it implies, we must love all other things for God's sake. No one except God is to be loved for his or her own sake. All created things are means towards the one end of glorifying God.
- 3) **Third**, it implies we must love God, not as a means to some other end, but as our ultimate satisfaction. To love God is to love Him as the one and only God, the one in which our desires and hopes terminate and find fulfilment.
- 4) **Fourth**, we must love God appropriately. Right love corresponds the nature of the object loved. We cannot love God any way we please and think it will flatter Him, Our love must be the kind of love that you give to a being like God. This is the most important and strongest defence against sexual temptation.

When our heart is seeking ultimate life, identity, fulfilment and satisfaction in the excellency and beauty of God Himself, it is the ultimate fire-break against sexual temptation. The problem with all sinful desire is that it is a kind of dilution and weakening of holy desire. It takes the strength and power of holy, zealous desires for God Himself, and spreads them over a bunch of illicit desires, until what was a rushing stream of joy in God, is now a sickly trickle here and there. Proverbs alludes to that:

Proverbs 5:15-19 Drink water from your own cistern, And running water from your own well. ¹⁶ Should your fountains be dispersed abroad, Streams of water in the streets? ¹⁷ Let them be only your own, And not for strangers with you. ¹⁸ Let your fountain be blessed, And rejoice with the wife of your youth. ¹⁹ As a loving deer and a graceful doe, Let her breasts satisfy you at all times; And always be enraptured with her love.

This is why John says that the victory which overcomes the world is our faith. Faith and love are closely aligned. To love the unseen God is to do so by faith. Pursuing God as the final and absolute goal of your life means you must continually evaluate all the desires in your life. If something is going off on a tangent, and seeking to be an end in itself, then it must be cut off or re-channeled into the river of love for God. Lawful sexual desire can and should be part of love for God. Unlawful sexual desire cannot proceed if we are making all things subservient to our desire for God Himself. Therefore, above all, you must give attention to seeking God as your chief and ultimate love. Seek Him in the Word, privately and corporately. Seek Him in prayer, in praise, in obedience to the Scriptures, in service to His name. Seek to know the truth about God by learning it and obeying it, and you will increasingly come to see the beauty and loveliness of God and respond with love.

Love your wife as God has told you, not as Hollywood tells you. The love we need to have for our wives is spelt out for us in Ephesians 5. We see that it is a selfless love. Christ pleased not Himself but sought the good of His bride. We see that it is a sanctifying love. Christ sought to cleanse and wash His bride for Himself. We see that it is a satisfying love. Christ nourishes and cherishes the church, bringing her great joy. We see that it is a steadfast love – Christ perseveres with the church. We need to reprogram our minds to see that even sexual love is not about a voracious quenching of an appetite for self-gratification, it is part of a sacrificial, sanctifying, satisfying and steadfast love relationship. Your wife will never live up to the fantasy world of porn. She is not supposed to. On the other hand, I Corinthians instructs husbands and wives to have a frequent and mutually satisfying sexual relationship. This is part of holy love between man and wife. To deny one another this right is, as Paul put it, to give Satan an opportunity to tempt. After love for God, our love for our spouse is the greatest shield against falling into sexual temptation. Put simply, the better the relationship, the more the spouse has 'eyes only' for the other. The deeper the bond, the greater the desire in the man to fight temptation. For single men – learn to love women as God has instructed you – as sisters, mothers, neighbours. Learn to love as a protector, provider and leader – not as a sexual conqueror.

Learn to approve what is excellent. *Philippians 1:9-11 And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, ¹¹ being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.*

A man does not get a taste for pornography overnight. Our tastes are malleable things. They grow by exposure and example. The more we are exposed to something, the more we may gain a taste for it. Our loves are not static, but dynamic. Your loves are shaped by many things. What you expose yourself to, and what reaches your imagination, shapes your loves. Therefore, we must take all the more care when it comes to those things which reach our imaginations, which present images to us. Literature, magazines, movies, music, sculpture, paintings, dance, theatre – these are all art. Art gives our minds images to work with. If these images are not the kind of image which promotes

ordinate affection, we should reject it. By the way, we should not stop merely at art which contains the lewd or immoral. We should beware of art which spoils our minds with sentimentality, or romantic notions of reality, or false escapist visions of the world, or any kind of art which portrays reality in a way which does not accord with God's statements about reality. Whether it portrays reality too sweetly, or whether it portrays reality too darkly, either way, that art is lying and a Christian should not make a habit of using it.

The more we consider what the things are saying, the more our discernment will grow, and we will be learning to love what God loves and hate what he hates. We will also be learning to love those things to the degree that God loves them, and in the manner that God loves them. This is ordinate affection, and it is the ultimate guard against the brutal and passionate nature of sexual temptation.

We would like the fight against temptation to be a quick 5-step program. But life is not like that. The reality of the power of sin is not like that. We must put various fire-break in place. For our worst day, we put in place the possibility of being found out and the stark reality of what we would lose. For our day-to-day, we maintain the defences against temptation by fleeing with our eyes, planning not to sin, and cutting off what keeps tripping us up. But on the deepest level, we must love. We must love God supremely, so that our desire for Him drives our inordinate desire like light dispels darkness. We must love our wives as God has told us to. This kind of love will again make illicit sexual desire seem weak and trivial. We must learn to love what God loves throughout our lives, so that evil desires become increasingly distasteful to us,