



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Habit's Harsh Bondage
(*The Pornographic Culture*,
pp. 31-37)

Suggested Article:

📖 Sexual Authenticity and
Character
(*The Pornographic Culture*,
pp. 83-87)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful
for your personal or group
study? Please send your
suggestions to:
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Christian Reflection

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Habit's Harsh Bondage

How can we understand the powerful lure of sexual imagery that captivates us? If the obsession with the pornographic image is a sickness, it is a sickness of will for which we are, to some significant degree, responsible.

Prayer†

**O God, I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.**

Listen to the words of Jesus: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone. Has no one condemned you? Neither do I condemn you. Go your way and from now on do not sin again."

Amen.

Scripture Reading: Romans 7:14-25

Reflection

"Wretched man that I am!" shouts Paul, calling out like a slave, seeking rescue. "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

Anyone who's been captivated by pornography's images has experienced what Paul describes. How do these images become an obsession? To what extent are we responsible for falling under their power? Augustine provides subtle insight into "habit's harsh bondage." As we make choices, our choices begin to modify what we desire, how we think, and what gives us pleasure; our choices gradually shape habits, which change who we are.

Mysteriously, our desires are distorted by the whole trend of choices that human beings have made. (This is the doctrine of the fall into sin. "Man has called for anarchy: God lets him have it," C. S. Lewis writes.) All of our desires are malfunctioning, but our sexual desires clearly exhibit this disorder. "With great frequency, reason tilts in one direction while sexual desire tugs in another," Kennedy notes. "Thus, we turn to gaze when we think we shouldn't; we find erotic and sexually stimulating things we believe we ought not to find pleasurable at all. We discover that sexual arousal often escapes our control; at times we are unable to function sexually when we want to; at other times we find ourselves sexually aroused when we would rather not be."

"The lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life" (1 John 2:16, NASB) become irresistible. "Perhaps it is most helpful ... to view these three—the lusts of the flesh and the eyes and the pride of life—not as three distinct temptations, but as one temptation, powerfully drawing individuals into the clutches of pornography," Kennedy suggests. "To be sure, the lust of the flesh is the guiding desire, but pornography satisfies the flesh by means of the eye, and then, with the assistance of the proud and misguided confidence that we can handle things by ourselves, habits that enslave us are formed."



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Augustine found release from his bondage to habit only in God's severe grace. As slaves, we cannot free ourselves. Note the irony: if self-control is what we lack, then we cannot self-medicate ourselves with willpower. J. Heinrich Arnold has observed that if we struggle to "will away" sinful thoughts about or desires for pornographic material, we actually bring those thoughts and desires into sharper mental focus. Consequently, we feel that we are powerless and our liberation is out of reach. Should we be disappointed, then, at his advice to give up the struggle? "Arnold is wise to steer us away from misguided 'self-help' schemes, to point us away from 'struggle' models and toward 'surrender,'" Hadaway suggests. "This is an essential first reflective step on the long road towards liberation from sinful habits of thought that bind us."

Study Questions

1. Consider Kennedy's example of pornography's seduction. It begins, "So it is with us. The visual temptation might start with a billboard ad, a magazine cover, a movie scene, or a webpage" (*The Pornographic Culture*, pp. 35-36). How does this illustrate Augustine's account of the harsh bondage of habit?
2. "The lust of the eyes," according to Augustine, is a "type of curiosity, a 'vain inquisitiveness' into the look of things, and an intense desire merely to see something provocative or shocking. This desire, which is rarely satisfied, is fueled by the promise of new and ever more stimulating views." How does pornography exploit this sort of curiosity?
3. Discuss John Michael Talbot's observation in "Other Voices" (*The Pornographic Culture*, p. 58) that begins, "We are what we think. This is why we should never underestimate what we allow to enter our minds."
4. Should we consider obsession with pornographic images to be a sickness?

Departing Hymn: "Take Thou Our Minds, Dear Lord" (verses 1, 3, and 4)

Take Thou our minds, dear Lord, we humbly pray,
give us the mind of Christ each passing day;
teach us to know the truth that sets us free;
grant us in all our thoughts to honor Thee.

Take Thou our wills, Most High! Hold Thou full sway;
have in our inmost souls Thy perfect way;
guard Thou each sacred hour from selfish ease;
guide Thou our ordered lives as Thou dost please.

Take Thou ourselves, O Lord, heart, mind, and will;
through our surrendered souls Thy plans fulfill.
We yield ourselves to Thee—time, talents, all;
we hear, and henceforth heed, Thy sovereign call.

William H. Foulkes (1918)

Suggested tunes: BREAD OF LIFE or ELLERS

† Adapted from Psalm 51 and John 8:7-11 (NRSV).

Habit's Harsh Bondage

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Question 1 or 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider the power that images have to shape our appetites and responses.
2. To see how Augustine's account of habit illuminates how viewing pornographic images can become an obsession.
3. To understand why we cannot simply "will away" sinful thoughts and desires.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Pornographic Culture (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and the suggested article before the group meeting. The tune BREAD OF LIFE is usually paired with the text, "Break Thou the Bread of Life." The alternate tune, ELLERS, is in most hymnals or www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with stories

"The dean of a prestigious divinity school is discovered to have downloaded to his computer several hundred pornographic pictures of women. It costs him his job, public respect and, we may surmise, a good deal of self-respect. The pastor at a large evangelical church is arrested for using a chat-room on the Internet to make contact with a thirteen year old and to solicit sex from her.... Each man, captive to images, traded his goodness for gratification. How are we to make sense of their actions? How can we understand the powerful lure of these sexual images etched upon their minds and their monitors?

"We might conclude that we are dealing with hypocrites of the highest order, with men ... whose religion is merely a sham, but that need not be the case here.... Somehow, images from which they could not escape gained occasional control over their lives." (*The Pornographic Culture*, pp. 31-32)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Close this time of prayer by reading responsively the prayer of confession in the lesson. The prayer begins in unison with lines in bold print, and the leader reads the lines in regular print.

Scripture Reading

Ask a member to read Romans 7:14-25 from a modern translation.

Reflection

We can become slaves to sinful desires and, as a result, become 'divided' selves. Paul says this in Romans 7:14-25 and Augustine reflects upon this in his *Confessions*. This pattern, as Thomas Kennedy suggests, helps us to understand how pornographic images can become an obsession for some people.

The study guide focuses on Augustine's account of how sinful desires develop into habits that enslave us. (For more discussion of the resulting 'divide' in the self, see *The Pornographic Culture*, pp. 34 and 36.)

Augustine grew up in a pornographic culture in Carthage, filled with powerful images of sexual immorality in the daily theater. In his writings he often drew upon 1 John 2:16 to account for the power of these images in his own life. (The NASB translation used in the study guide closely tracks the original Greek meaning as well as Augustine's Latin translation.) We have powerful appetites for sensual pleasure and for seeing something shocking and provocative, and a misguided tendency to believe that we can control these appetites (and, indeed, all aspects of our selves) by ourselves. Pornography attacks all of these weaknesses. In rightly ordered folks, Augustine suggests, reason would control any untoward appetites, evaluating them and then resisting their wayward pull. But in our sinful state, appetites are more distorted and their force is impossible to resist, so we find ourselves, as Paul says, doing what we don't really want (in our best judgment) to do.

At this point we can understand J. Heinrich Arnold's observation that we cannot simply 'will away' sinful thoughts or desires. Augustine's reliance upon God's grace makes psychological as well as theological sense.

Study Questions

1. Choices are involved at each stage in the seduction which Kennedy describes. Yet as certain appetites are encouraged and habits are formed, the choosing becomes more 'automatic' and we have less control over those appetites. For Augustine, this process of habit-formation and entrapment forges our 'bondage' or 'slavery' to sinful thoughts and desires.
2. Members might discuss ways that the pornographic industry anticipates and uses this psychological mechanism of habit-formation in its clients. The email solicitations, the difficulty in leaving Internet sites, the visually suggestive photos in magazines, the exploration of sexual history of celebrities, the production of movies with minimal but enticing story-lines, and the self-presentation of pornography as 'forbidden' are some examples.
3. Talbot's call for caution turns on the lesser 'control' that we have over our thoughts. It is easier to censor actions than thoughts. (A murderous thought enters the mind easily, but we manage to resist the murderous action.) So, Maximus warns that the spiritual attack will be directed toward our thoughts.
4. A 'sickness' interpretation might suggest the obsession (a) 'invaded' an unwilling victim like a virus, and (b) can be cured by medication. These suggestions ignore the role of will and choice in the cause and cure of the obsession. On the other hand, the obsession is like a 'sickness' in that it reduces our resistance (to other untoward appetites), impairs our functioning (by dividing the self), and causes further problems (in our relationships).

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.