

Chasing elephants, St Alfs, 18 May 2013

- intimacy, lust and porn, to follow up the 2012 men's evening.

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I'm not sure why Bill Austin asked me to lead this evening's discussion, but I aim to make it complementary to Simon Camilleri last year. Later we will hear from someone who can speak of his own experience.

Let me start where I aim to finish, and talk about 3 Fs: Some of you will be here with an acute or perhaps just chronic sense of **failure**, others will be here all too conscious of your ongoing **flawed nature**, mixed motives, etc, and perhaps doubting whether God can use you. But either way, in fact God persists, and can use us if we seek and accept his **forgiveness** here as elsewhere. Whether you feel you are failed, flawed or morally feeble, Jesus has dealt with that on the cross and you can be forgiven, cleansed, and get a fresh start.

That is reassuring, but complacency can be deadly. We must never lose sight of being in the midst of spiritual warfare, nor underestimate the extent to which Satan can exquisitely tailor temptation to match our main vulnerabilities, especially regarding sex. If you underestimate that you will be done for and sidelined in discipleship, or simply destroyed.

Close friendships, intimacy

But before we turn to sex, let's have a look at what is in many ways a more basic human need: **Relational intimacy** is a basic human need, and a major driver for it is our sexuality. The most obvious human intimacy is in the marriage relationship, which is the human equivalent of the intimate relationship between Christ and his people as in Ephesians 5:22f.

But any intimacy in close friendships is where we can be fully known, and know another, transcending the ordinary level of human relationships.

This intimacy with trusted friends is both an emotional connection and reciprocal openness and knowledge of one another - knowing and being known.

- It means being open and able to speak from the depths of our heart, and reciprocally, to be accepted.

- It means feeling free to be largely uninhibited in that relationship.

Just as with marital intimacy, here too there is a corresponding divine template: Jesus when addressing a mixed audience said: "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me - just as the Father knows me and I know the Father." (John 10:14-15) The reciprocal knowing of his people and Jesus reflects that intimacy between Father and Son. That sets a high standard for general as distinct from marital intimate relationships among us as God's "sheep".

In our western culture with ready acceptance of promiscuous sex, the prevalent notion of intimacy tends to be largely physical and sexual. Soul intimacy of open sharing and emotional connectedness is often ignored, disparaged or dismissed.

This is a real barrier to proper non-sexual intimacy, it may stigmatise same-sex friendships, and it creates an image of masculinity in our individualistic culture which simply does not allow for wholesome intimacy with other males.

Yet for very many people, especially coming out of emotional deficiencies in family background, there is a huge need for building close relationships of this kind, and experiencing love as that word is used by Christians. That then is a source of real joy!

So there is a challenge for Christians to counter the cultural bias which plays down or stigmatises platonic intimacy, with male or female close friends.

Outside of marriage (for single as well as married people), there can be, and needs to be, very meaningful intimacy which is non-sexual, with close friends regardless of gender.

- It is driven by the heart, not the hormones.

- It takes time and hanging out together to build the rapport involved - there is no proper intimacy that is instant or short-term.

- It involves sharing our life with others, and a sense of security and corresponding confidentiality.

We all need build and grow such relationships which meet both our own needs and those of others. See also section 1.3 in *Down to Earth Discipleship* (on web).

So how does this relate to porn?

In our culture, a hunger for intimacy can drive a person towards sexual encounter, and if this is not immediately to hand or attractive, then pornography is right there. The fact that its image of sex is wildly distorted is beside the point, but it can give a vicarious fix, it can be a safe alternative to intimacy (Chester), and it easily leads to pornography addiction problems (Struthers).

At adolescent level, a lack of intimacy, particularly with father, but also with peers, creates issues with self-esteem.

This leads to the question of what does masculinity look like for the Christian? No time here, but section 1.7 in *Down to Earth Discipleship*.

Sexual Physiology & Lust (interactive segment)

What comprises our (good) created sexuality?

What is (sinful) lust? The unbridled desire to possess another person sexually.

How and where does the one leads to the other?

How understanding that give scope for control?

1. God's design

Sexual buzz, excite

Wired for arousal

testosterone

pheromones, pleasure

bonding, emotional connect

sex as addictive

Yearning

touch

Physique

Serial conquest??

3. OK area

nice legs/boobs

touching/ being touched

eager interest in person

intense social engagement

2. What is lust?

mentally undressing

fantasies

person as sex object

Vanity factor

God's design

Before homing in on the problems, let's acknowledge that God has created the sexual aspect of our humanity wonderfully! No amount of anguish about lust or porn or infidelity can be allowed to obscure that, or to diminish our thanks and praise for what is so good!

It is a wonderful thing that the **human sexual anatomy** is clearly designed and constructed for pleasure in marriage, not simply procreation. Not only are we better endowed genitally than other primates, but uniquely among animals the equipment is designed to be used face to face with prolonged full body contact, enjoyed over considerable time. Consider the contrast between that, with the male flesh deeply inside the female, and a fleeting act of insemination by a dog, cat or bird! In the words of an Anglican marriage liturgy, we are set up to be able to worship our spouse with our bodies. God's creation of human sexuality is really amazing, even if that very fact opens it to misuse outside of marriage, and even if many use it self-indulgently so as effectively to reduce it to that animal level from the one-flesh way it is designed.

But human anatomy is not the main issue. The main male sex organ is the brain. That is where our focus needs to be, so we need to talk about lust.

Lust

Why is lust a problem? (takes us mentally to activities and situations that are improper, unhelpful and ultimately degrading our appreciation of sex.)

If conscience is insufficient to alert and alarm us, then let's listen to Paul in **Colossians 3:5-7**. "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived."

Lust is the chief expression of sin that we focus on this evening, but all sin needs to be put to death in this sense.

And more positively, from **Romans 12:1-2**. "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Don't conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

Lust has a lot to do with hindering the renewal of our minds to align with God's values and purposes. Those two verses could be taken as setting the theme for this evening.

Many of you will be familiar with the mention of lust in **Matthew 5:28**, in the sermon on the mount, where Jesus says "I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." That makes the point very clearly that if we try and make a big distinction, or any moral distinction, between what goes on in our heads and what we actually do sexually we are kidding ourselves. Despite some breathless Christian rhetoric, it clearly does not mean that we should suppress our natural sexual response, but redirect and control it. We say quite a lot about this passage in section 2.2 of *Down to Earth Discipleship* (on web).

Everyone is different, there is no one-size-fits-all in these areas.

An important bible passage, at least for married guys, is **I Cor 7:2-5**.

"But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband. The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife. Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control."

But even sex inside marriage doesn't fully deal with lust! Any of us can experience mad intense attraction to particular females over some time. This sort of obsession doesn't arise out of any inadequate sex life, it's much more part of guys' wiring for serial conquest, perhaps a carry-over from our animal ancestry. In my case I never propositioned any of those I was lustfully attracted to – they likely would have died of laughter. It indicates the major factor of vanity here, as perhaps in most lust.

Perhaps the best treatment or antidote for vanity is hilarity, so if you confess to your accountability partner that you have this insane crush on a particular woman, and he splits his side laughing, then do feel free to join in!

(Michael Ramsay, the 100th Archbishop of Canterbury said *“Use your sense of humour - laugh about things. Laugh at the absurdities of life; laugh about yourself and about your own absurdity ... You have to be serious, but never be solemn, because if you are solemn about anything, there is a danger of you becoming solemn about yourself.”*)

So for married guys, note Paul's words in 1 Cor 7: the best and most basic way of avoiding getting tripped up by lust is to have more sex with your wife! He's pretty explicit about that.

But everyone is different, in nature, in conditioning and in circumstances, so we each need to work out how – at the stage of life where we are - we can best minimize lust and manifest self-control while not withdrawing from our culture. There is a balance, which will differ for each of us, between fully engaging our culture, and keeping some aspects at arm's length.

Masturbation

Regarding masturbation, it is many things for different people at different stages of their life pre-marriage. Like sex, it is properly private, but it should not be secret from our peer-level friends. Certainly, there is no need for any more sense of shame than married people have re talking about sex. But unlike sex, it is not relational, and therefore quite distinct from sex, even though the same equipment is involved.

Once again: we are all different, in hormones, hang-ups, and conditioning, so in these matters without clear biblical direction our individual practices will properly differ.

But let me give Jordan Hitchcock the floor to say a bit more on that before we break for a meal:

Is masturbation wrong? No, but lust is, and so is failing to master our own bodies (self-control). It isn't mentioned in the bible, so is neither celebrated nor condemned. So how do we evaluate things like this? We must be careful not to stigmatize things that God has not forbidden – this is a real issue with masturbation. On the other hand we must realize that something being permissible does not necessarily make it positive or helpful (1 Cor. 6:12).

In the case of masturbation, we can say that though the act in and of itself may not be wrong, neither is it God's original intention for human sexuality. God created sex not to be a solo, self-centered act, but to be about mutual self-sacrifice and giving between a man and a woman in covenant relationship. So while we should not forbid an act that the bible does not forbid, neither should we assert it as being in accordance with God's plan for human sex. But let me say again, I cannot see that the act in itself should be stigmatized.

However, 'acts' never exist in isolation. The act of masturbation is driven by a person, their biology, their heart and their mind. So perhaps the best way to look at this is for each person to ask themselves: What drives masturbation for me? Is it just an occasional biological release? (No comment from the bible.) Is it a habit that has mastered you? (the Bible says we are to control our own bodies!) Is it the culmination of an inner life of lustful fantasy? Are you using masturbation to

‘consummate’ immoral fantasies? (Lustful thoughts are condemned by Jesus in Matthew 15:19: “For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.” And as we have just heard, lust is also condemned by Paul.)

To sum up: it’s not mentioned, so no stigma, but not God’s plan, so no celebration. The important question is ‘What’s driving it for me?’ And, ‘Am I the master of it, or is it the master of me?’

The *Down to Earth Discipleship* (on web) section 4.3 addresses the subject.

Pornography

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSF82AwSDiU>

<http://www.yourbrainonporn.com> > “The Great Porn Experiment”

Many of you will have been at last year’s Elephant in the Room evening, or accessed that recording on the web site. This video builds on that and should reinforce your rational perception of porn as really dangerous. But for Christians, while we all battle with lust, embarking on a porn session amounts to embracing sin full on, with open arms. Make no mistake about that!

My generation tends to have less experience of porn than today’s young generation, though we all know that it is very much in your face on the internet, and accessible not only on computers but also mobile phones. This is a huge challenge for today’s teenagers especially, and is also relevant to each of us with children or grandchildren, if not personally. Many adult Christian guys succumb to viewing it, though the main tragedy is with teenagers doing so. Obviously they are more impressionable and more vulnerable.

I want to express a huge vote of thanks to more than a dozen 20-ish guys, about half from St Alfs, who have brought me up to speed on porn attraction over the last eight months. They have been incredibly generous in sharing their experience, which has enabled me to rewrite several sections of *Down to Earth Discipleship* on the web, and of course inform my inputs to this evening. Some of that experience they shared has been really awful, but in every case God has brought or is bringing them out of it strongly. I am inspired and humbled by many of them, as I contrast their godly endeavor with my own feeble approach to sexual matters in my 20s.

Viewing porn can range all the way from an innocent look through to repeated access and wrestling with the attractiveness of it, to full-on addiction with acting out in masturbation each time. The only positive thing here is that there is that negative feedback we have seen on the video: when someone in their early 20s encounters erectile dysfunction (ED) – a terrible thing at that age - and works out that it’s due to their porn viewing, there is a very strong incentive to quit both porn and masturbation.

The stats on the screen from the entry questionnaire show that two thirds have significantly accessed porn, and half have done so over a period of more than two years. But most encouragingly, half of those two thirds have put the matter behind them, and the other half are in the process of doing so! None here are failing to address the problem.

Men seem to be wired in such a way that pornography hijacks the proper functioning of their brains and has a long-lasting effect on their thoughts and lives. If this is happening against a Christian set of values, it’s a depressing struggle.

If any are in that boat:

First, recognize that any attraction to porn that you flirt with or indulge in is far more toxic and dangerous than you probably realize, and approach God in prayer to ask his help in dealing with it and reinforcing your decision to turn it off.

Second, the secrecy of your thoughts and internet access must be broken without delay. Resolve right now that within 24 hours you will spill your guts to a trusted friend, and for once and all face up to the very real shame, and abandon that secrecy and isolation for ever. This should not be traumatic if you remember that hardly any of your peers will not have wrestled with the same problem at some – probably recent – stage. You are far from unique. The trusted friend should be another guy, not spouse or girlfriend. He should ideally be mature, supportive, wise, trustworthy, discrete, compassionate and emotionally resilient – perhaps a mentor, but most likely a peer-level friend. But whatever, you must break the secrecy and confront the shame! Maybe also talk to Mike, Jordan or Sam.

Third, set up accountability arrangements if you don't already have them. At least one human accountability partner, perhaps that trusted friend, is most important. But also quickly get set up with internet software such as Covenant Eyes or X3 Watch on your computer and iPhone, nominating a few trusted friends to receive e-mail notice of your lapses in internet self-control.

Fourth: Having slammed the bag on porn, you need to reboot your brain! Consistent advice on this is that you need to avoid both porn and any sexual activity or masturbation for 90 days – known as “NoFap”. Cold turkey. This is the basic need in restoring the proper functioning of your brain in relation to sexual matters. The patterns of sexual arousal and response in the brain need to be rewired, you need a neurochemical rebirth. And since the depraved neural pathways were established and reinforced over some time, so the new ones will take time to develop to the point where they become the default paths, and you start to become turned on by real females again.

Even after the 90 days abstinence, this ‘porn to people’ transition can be slow. While it's underway, stop all masturbation and re-establish relationships that have lapsed or been damaged because of your preoccupation with porn trips. It may be helpful to try and work out if there is any particular root of the problem in your sexual and relational background or history. Review your own sense of masculinity, your sexuality and your need for intimacy. This will be an ongoing process with friend, mentor and possibly counselor.

But not everybody is afflicted to the same extent - some of those in the 20ish age group I have talked with have certainly succumbed to curiosity about porn in their teenage years and then recognized it as an unhealthy attraction, so have pulled back from porn after some months and steered clear of it since. These seem to have had a reasonably relaxed attitude to sexual matters since puberty, and have not particularly associated masturbation with porn.

As someone put it on a web blog associated with that YourBrainOnPorn site: “Our brains were designed to be turned on. But not this often, this instantly, this pleurably, and without any consequences at all.”

And if it's a married guy involved with porn, the collateral damage to the partner is considerable. Let's not overlook that.

(Testimony from guest Wayne Knight, followed by panel discussion)

All this raises the question of how St Alfs can best help all of us in relation to sexual matters, especially lust, and head off any inclination to explore porn. The basis is sound biblical teaching which we enjoy, with sermons which will from time to time expound relevant issues. Supplementing that, there needs to be more targeted discussion and access to books and web sites.

Obviously adolescence needs to be a focus, since it is in the turmoil of all those hormones often preceding emotional maturity that there is great vulnerability. During adolescence the reward function of the brain is very active and more vulnerable to any addiction, also the brain itself is very plastic. I would strongly recommend that once you have acted on

my earlier four exhortations if needed, any of you young guys here this evening talk with your small group leader about how you are going.

A fuller treatment of porn is in section 2.5 of *Down to Earth Discipleship* (on web).

Conclusion

Let me finish with the 3 Fs:

Some of you will be here with an acute or perhaps just chronic sense of **failure** in sexual matters and perhaps particularly porn, others will be here all too conscious of your ongoing **flawed nature**, impure thoughts, mixed motives, etc, and being **morally feeble**, so perhaps doubting whether God can use you or even has time for you. But either way, in fact God persists and can use us if we seek and accept his **forgiveness** here as elsewhere.

As we have heard in the sermon series recently, King David was a spectacular failure, with his murder and adultery, but having sought and received God's forgiveness, he was a 'man after God's heart'.

Whether you feel you are failed, flawed or morally feeble, Jesus has dealt with that on the cross and you can be forgiven, cleansed, and get a fresh start. Not only so, but a restored perspective on oneself as a child of God will deal with the sense of shame from whatever failures that weigh upon us.

And more positively: Philippians 4:8 "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things!" – not just sex, and certainly not its bizarre distortion in porn!

So, to summarise: treat your sexual drive as a given, it's not going to go away and it must therefore be managed.

Secondly, change may need to be initiated urgently but it will take time to work through into new attitudes and new mental pathways.

Thirdly, don't try and do it alone, reach out for the love and support of male friends, and reciprocate that.

And finally, to reiterate: human sex is wonderful! We need to understand that so that we think and act more according to the designer's and creator's intentions rather than being driven by our fallen nature.

Four recommended web sites:

[Http://downtoearthdiscipleship.com](http://downtoearthdiscipleship.com)

(intimacy: 1.3, lust: 2.2, porn: 2.5, masturbation: 4.3)

<http://www.guiltypleasure.tv>

<http://www.citylifechurch.com/valiantman/>

<http://www.yourbrainonporn.com>

Recommended books:

William Struthers, *Wired for Intimacy* – how porn hijacks the male brain

Allan Meyer, *Valiant Man* (book and course)