

# BEYOND

ACCOUNTABILITY

the life-changing power  
of authentic friendship

by Nate Larkin

Foreword by Bobby Harrington

A Discipleship•org Resource

# **BEYOND ACCOUNTABILITY**

The Life-changing Power  
of Authentic Friendship

**NATE LARKIN**

Foreword by Bobby Harrington

**NASHVILLE, TN**

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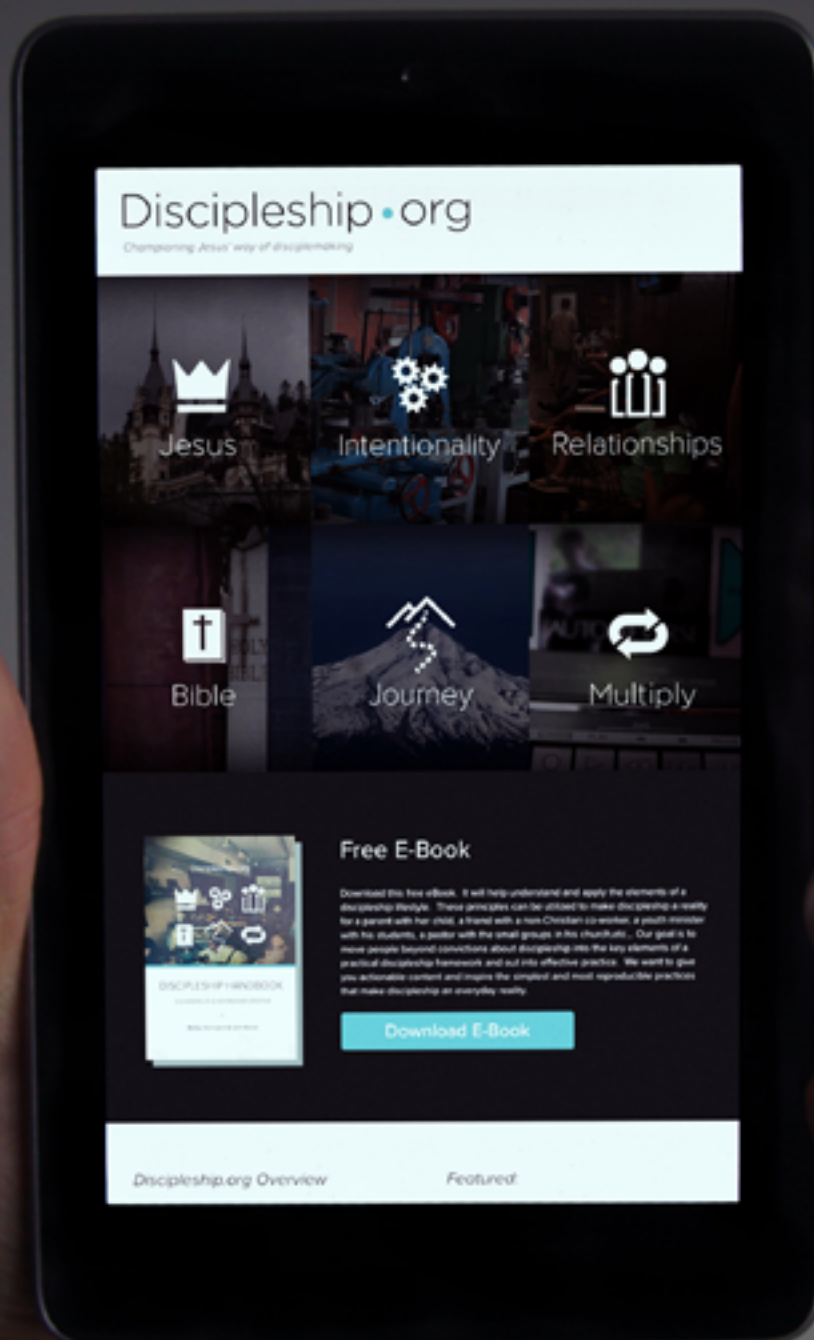
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# Foreword

*Beyond Accountability* tells an important story about pornography and sexual addiction.

It is a story that Christians, especially Christian leaders, need to hear. We need to hear it, because from knowing thousands of pastors through my work in the church on a national level, I believe it is a hidden epidemic in every church. Let me say it plainly: sexual addiction is rampant in the Church in this country and beyond!

Nate's story is about many of the men in our churches (young and old), and it's the story of an increasing number of women in our churches. It is a hidden, invisible plague. In every church, there are disciples of Jesus who are trapped and desperately need help. They need wise disciple makers—authentic friends—who can guide them along a similar path to the one Nate describes.

Nate tells his story with honesty, grace, and truth. His story may be hard for some to hear, but please hear it. Listen empathetically, listen thoughtfully, listen with mental courage. Because:

1. Most Christians will deal with their sexual sin in *unhelpful and hurtful ways*, as Nate describes.
2. Most Christian leaders, when they try to help those with an addiction, do more damage than good, as Nate describes.

Christians and Christian leaders are trying to do the right thing, but most of us do not have a real-world understanding of sin, addiction, and recovery. We mean well, but our attempts are misguided. We

## *Beyond Accountability*

need a real-world understanding of addiction and recovery. We need everyday disciple makers who have real-world knowledge to help people walk the path of recovery.

In this short book, Nate paints the path for us. You will find it eye-opening, frustrating, and perhaps even unsettling—then helpful, encouraging, and hopeful!

Dr. Bobby Harrington

*Pastor and Cofounder of Discipleship.org*



## Chapter 1

# AN ACHING DEEPER THAN WORDS

When I was a teenager, I secretly envied drug addicts and alcoholics. I didn't envy all of them, you understand. The ones I envied were *reformed* reprobates, *former* drug addicts and alcoholics whose testimonies (available in print or on cassette) served as cautionary tales for our church youth group. On those rare occasions when a celebrity ex-sinner made a personal appearance at our church, I would savor every syllable of his or her pre-conversion story. The seamier details of those stories were bitter, to be sure, served sparingly and with a sauce of regret, but I enjoyed them immensely.

The arc of the narrative is familiar. Thumbing his nose at social convention, a daredevil leaves home. He ventures through fields of pleasure until he reaches the gates of hell. He enters and for a brief time engages in riotous living, unaware that the gates have closed behind him. Soon he finds himself in shackles. He is a fool, but a fortunate one, because he does not die. He repents, and the moment he does, his shackles fall away, the gates of hell swing open, and he stumbles back home to a hero's welcome, bringing with him the memories of a great adventure.

Those stories were always told in the past tense, as our theology required. The position of our church in those days was basically this: addiction is sin, and all addicts are sinners—period. An addict is simply someone who needs to get saved. Anyone who has been truly converted has been released from the bondage of sin—“old things have passed away, behold all things have become new”—and is now empowered to conduct a sin-free life.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, he is expected to do so. All episodes of drinking or drugging, cursing or dancing, movie-going or card-playing are now in the past. If his sinful behavior ever returns, the addict has backslidden and must get re-saved.

I was six years old when I first responded to an altar call at a summer youth camp, and every summer thereafter I walked the aisle again, although many times only mentally. On Friday night, the last night of youth camp, the chaplain would make his final plea while his wife played “I Surrender All” on the piano. Head bowed and palms sweating, I would mouth the sinner’s prayer, silently acknowledging the unspeakable acts that had wrecked my salvation, vowing to do better and begging God for the lightning-bolt deliverance from temptation that he had bestowed on those lucky former addicts. This annual cleansing ritual always triggered a sense of relief, and I would leave camp the next day on a spiritual high, fully resolved to resist temptation and convinced that this year I would succeed. Fat chance. Within days, I would remember porn.

## **The Visual Narcotic**

My first exposure to pornography—a *Playboy* magazine displayed at eye level at the back of a neighborhood store—had taken me completely by surprise. I hadn’t known that porn even existed. No one

had warned me that every boy eventually sees porn. Nobody had told me that every boy instinctively *likes* porn, because it depicts something we are wired by God to want. But suddenly, there she was, this voluptuous naked woman with a tantalizing smile. I stood transfixed, my heart racing and blood pounding in my ears.

I knew instinctively that what I was seeing was wrong, but I didn't know exactly *why* it was wrong.<sup>2</sup> I just felt guilty for having seen it and ashamed of having liked it, so I responded in the way that humanity has responded to guilt and shame ever since the dawn of time. I covered it up. I hid.

Addiction, we now know, is invariably rooted in trauma. A person who is overwhelmed by feelings of inadequacy, terror, or loneliness will naturally reach for anything capable of calming those feelings. For most of us, the transitional years between childhood and adulthood were awkward and often painful, so it is not surprising that we soothed ourselves with ritualistic behaviors. For 12-year-old Nate Larkin, the normal stresses of adolescence had been amplified by my mother's mental illness and eventual suicide. Our home, once a haven, had become a virtual gulag of repressed emotions and physical abuse. Small wonder, then, that I was immediately enraptured by the naked, mature female smiling at me from the newsstand. Her company promised relief from an aching deeper than words.

For a small-town Christian boy in the 1960s and 70s, porn-collecting was risky business. I was a pastor's kid, a high performer with a clean-cut reputation and a zero-tolerance dad. Still, I eventually was able to amass a small library of *Playboy* and *Penthouse* magazines, along with dog-eared pulp paperbacks, which I kept concealed behind the furnace in the church basement. Once, in a bid for freedom, I dumped the whole pile into a rusty burn barrel behind the church

and ceremoniously set it alight, not realizing until it was too late that the wind could carry charred fragments of incriminating evidence in the direction of our house. I never did that again.

## **Porn and Marriage**

By the time I reached college, the ongoing battle with my conscience had completely worn me out, so I decided to surrender. I was tired of feeling guilty all the time, tired of making promises I couldn't keep. *All that guilt, I told myself, was probably nothing more than the residue of an overly puritanical upbringing.* It was time for me to grow up, join the modern world, and get comfortable with my sexuality. I needed sex education; what better place to get it than porn? I rationalized porn use during my college years as “practice for marriage,” unaware that I was actually poisoning my marriage, allowing porn to create expectations for marriage that no woman on the planet could ever fulfill.

Predictably, I also lost my virginity in college. (I didn't *lose* it exactly—it's not like I misplaced it; I just found someone willing to take it off my hands.) I kept this fact secret, however, because I was also the leader of the Campus Christian Fellowship, with the Lord's reputation to consider. Besides, I was on the lookout for The Wife, the godly woman who would anticipate my every need and satisfy my every desire, delivering me forever from the power of porn.

Allie showed up at our church one Sunday morning like a visiting angel. She was a brand-new Christian, a youthful-looking woman with a captivating smile, and I was instantly smitten. Miraculously, the feeling turned out to be mutual. Even though Allie was a single mom ten years my senior, she and I connected on a visceral level.

Our friendship blossomed quickly, our conversations as effortless as breathing. At the beginning of my senior year in college, we kissed for the first time. I proposed the next day, and we got married on the day I graduated. Then, off we went to graduate school and Princeton Seminary, where I fully expected to become a Great Man of God.

I was stunned to discover that marriage had not solved my porn problem. I shouldn't have been surprised. For years, I had been building a fantasy harem, a bevy of Playmates and Pets restocked with fresh arrivals every month. Over time, I had been conditioned by the porn industry to expect variety, to need novelty. Allie was a beautiful woman, to be sure, *but she was only one woman*. And unlike her airbrushed competitors in the glossy magazines, Allie had real feelings and another life outside the bedroom. My well-established habit of visiting the harem anytime I felt the least bit insecure soon reasserted itself. Then, it got worse.

### **A Tour of Times Square**

Coming out of a theology class one day, I ran into a cluster of students gazing at a poster. The poster was advertising a field trip, a guided tour of Times Square to be sponsored by the seminary and led by a group called "Women Against Pornography." Its purpose was to show us firsthand how women are exploited by the sex business. Spouses were welcome.

Suddenly, this seemed like a very good idea. *I don't like to see anyone hurt*, I reasoned, *so if I could just get a peek behind the curtain, if I could really see the ugly truth about porn, surely I would stop*. When I got back to our apartment that afternoon, I told Allie about the free trip to New York City, and she agreed to go.

That's how I came to see my first hardcore film, the kind of stuff any unsupervised eight-year-old can find in two minutes today on the Internet. Inside a Times Square sex shop pulsing with colored lights and reeking of disinfectant, our tour guide handed us tokens and ushered us into peep-show booths. Allie, sitting beside me in our booth, inserted a token. The lights dimmed, a projector clattered to life in the darkness behind us, and flickering figures appeared on the screen.

I didn't know it at the time, but this movie affected me in an entirely new way. Unlike still images, movies are immersive. They create the illusion of actual experience, blurring the line between fantasy and reality. Horror movies frighten the brain's primitive core, causing us to jump when the killer suddenly appears. Porn movies stimulate the pleasure center deep in the brain, completely overwhelming the cerebral cortex, where critical thinking takes place and moral judgments are made.

Allie wanted to throw up after what she'd seen, but I was immediately hooked, and within days of our trip to New York City, I found myself slipping away from home and seminary in search of a source for this powerful new drug. After finding several adult bookstores near Princeton, where I could get a fix, I began to weave the pattern of deception that is essential to the maintenance of a double life.

## **Rewiring and Resistance**

I didn't realize it at the time, but my daily porn use was steadily rewiring my brain, resetting my arousal template, altering my view of women, and weakening my connection to the world around me, including my wife. Allie and I had always been close, but suddenly she could see me drifting away emotionally. Mystified, she began to

wonder whether there was something wrong with her. Taking my cue from porn, I concluded that she was probably right. Allie was now too preoccupied by homemaking and child-rearing to satisfy my every sexual whim, so by using porn I was actually being considerate. Stopping at a peep show after work was like picking up a meal at McDonald's rather than expecting Allie to cook. It might even make dinner better. Besides, masturbating to porn was preferable to committing adultery, because it made physical infidelity unnecessary. I had promised to be faithful to my wife, and that was a promise I intended to keep. *With the help of porn, I thought, I will be able to satisfy my sexual appetite without imposing myself on Allie or involving a third party.*

I was able to ignore my conscience when it came to porn, but I was never able to silence it completely. One weekend, returning from a men's retreat, where the speaker had shared openly about his own past dependency on pornography, I sat down with Allie and confessed what I had been doing. This was not welcome news for my wife, but at least it helped explain my growing agitation and emotional distance, and Allie accepted it bravely. She said she understood. She would never endorse or accept any use of pornography, but she accepted *me* and was sorry I had been battling this temptation alone. She said she would join me in the fight. From now on, whenever I fell victim to temptation I could tell her. Anything, she said, would be better than secrecy.

For the next few weeks, whenever I found myself battling an unwanted sexual urge I would tell Allie, and the power of the impulse would wane. This was perfect! With my wife as my accountability partner, I could now contain my sexual brokenness while keeping it hidden from everybody else! My reputation was safe! Over time, however, I noticed that my disclosures were taking a toll on my wife.

She was willing to hear them, but this was not a burden she had been designed to carry, nor was this an area where she could operate with complete objectivity. Every temptation I reported seemed to imply that she was deficient in some way, and although she didn't shame me, my confessions were turning into an assault on Allie's self-esteem. I didn't enjoy them either. Admitting my weakness was humiliating, and I was starting to fear Allie would eventually lose hope and give up on me. So I stopped telling her. Allie concluded, naturally, that our campaign to overcome pornography had succeeded. Later, when I started using porn again on a regular basis, I comforted myself with the knowledge that I still loved my wife.

### **Crossing Another Line**

The delusional idea that porn would protect me from adultery was shattered a few years later, after we had moved to South Florida and started a church. It was Christmas Eve, and I was driving into Fort Lauderdale in the late afternoon to get things set up for a candlelight service. I had just exited I-95 and was traveling east on Broward Boulevard when it started to rain. Ahead of me, I could see a lone female figure walking along the sidewalk, so I pulled over to offer her a ride. She jumped in, shivering. A few seconds later, she propositioned me.

I had seen variations of this scenario—a chance encounter turns sexual at the urging of an insatiable female—countless times in porn films, but I had always been a voyeur. Suddenly, I was an actor in the scene, following a script I somehow knew by heart. After years of using porn, I had so objectified women that I didn't actually see the *person* who sat beside me in the car, offering oral sex for twenty bucks. I didn't pause to wonder what could have driven this particular girl



to walk the streets on Christmas Eve and sell herself to strangers. Why had she come to Fort Lauderdale? What were her dreams? Did she have a family? A boyfriend? A husband? A child? Was she an addict? Where was she living, and what threats awaited her at home? Not one of these questions occurred to me as I reached, almost automatically, for my wallet. I didn't even ask her name.

Later that evening, fumbling through the service while drowning in shame, I secretly swore I would never do that again. Within weeks, however, I was cruising the streets of Fort Lauderdale once more, looking for another prostitute. And then, I did it again. And again. And again.

This was very dangerous behavior, especially for a minister, but the possibility of getting caught produced an adrenaline rush that only heightened the excitement I felt whenever I was on the hunt. Afterward, the reality of what I was doing would crash on me like a tidal wave. This was insane, suicidal behavior. I was courting disaster. Hypocritical religious leaders were being exposed day after day, their tear-stained faces plastered on the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek* and their sex lives described in sordid detail on the evening news. I wasn't famous yet, but my status as a pastor meant I was a potential feature story. The prospect of public humiliation terrified me, so I stopped. I stopped dozens of times. Unfortunately, I could never *stay* stopped. As soon as the panic faded, I would start looking for prostitutes again.

## Going Under the Radar

I woke up on my thirtieth birthday knowing I couldn't keep this up. Although I had managed to keep my illicit sexual behavior secret, I lived in constant dread, dominated by self-loathing and dogged by

despair. The only sensible course of action seemed clear: if I couldn't stop what I was doing, I should leave the ministry. When I mentioned to Allie that I was feeling "burned out" and was considering quitting my job, she said she would support that decision. She thought a career change might make it possible for me to find contentment, focus on my marriage and family, and become the man that she and the children needed. So, after five years in the ministry, I abruptly quit and went into business.

Leaving the ministry did nothing to relieve my sexual obsession, however. I had escaped from one stressful vocation only to plunge headlong into another. Then, like an idiot, I medicated my fear of financial insecurity by spending more money on porn and prostitutes. Miraculously, the new business prospered anyway, making it possible for me to dive even deeper into the seamy world of strip clubs, sex shops, massage parlors, and escorts.

Still, I never left church. On our very first Sunday as civilians, Allie and I joined another congregation, and before long, I was teaching Sunday School, helping out with the youth group, and singing in the worship team. I even filled in for the pastor occasionally. How could I do this? Simple. My ability to dissociate, which I had developed during childhood to avoid painful realities, now made it possible for me to toggle from one mental state to another. I had, in effect, split. My inner disconnection was not entirely complete—Dr. Jekyll still carried memories of what Mr. Hyde was doing—but after a few worship songs and a private prayer for forgiveness, I could slip into the bright and shiny church persona everybody loved. My public version (the guy I now call "Saint Nate") was the person I believed God loved, and I made countless resolutions to continue being that person when church was over. Unfortunately, I could never get Saint Nate to

breathe on his own for very long outside the building, and I felt awful about that.

## **The Hammer Falls**

Several years into this phase of my double life, I was cruising one day in Fort Lauderdale when I received an urgent message from my pastor. He needed to speak with me right way about a matter of utmost importance. I panicked.

When I arrived at the pastor's office, I learned that another member had come to the church earlier that day to confess his problem with porn. During the course of his confession, that young man told the pastor that he had spotted me in an adult bookstore, leaving a peep-show booth. The pastor regarded me gravely. Was this true? I wavered. If I vehemently denied the accusation, I might be able to convince him of my innocence and preserve his good opinion of me. Stonewalling, however, would leave me trapped in a compulsive behavior I desperately wanted to escape. I hesitated, then nodded. Yes, it was true. I had visited that adult bookstore, and I had done so more than once.

I didn't tell the pastor the full extent of my secret life. I didn't say that I was practically a platinum member of the bookstore where I'd been spotted, nor did I mention the strip clubs, massage parlors, and prostitutes I had been patronizing. I carefully dipped one toe into the pool of confession and immediately found that the water was very hot.

This was a serious infraction, the pastor said, so he would need to get the elders involved. Obviously, my services as a lay leader were no longer needed. Given my visibility in the church, some sort of an-

nouncement or public confession might be necessary. He would notify the elders and let me know what they decided. Meanwhile, I should go home and tell my wife.

Driving toward home, I felt an odd mixture of shame, relief, and dread. My web of deceit was starting to unravel, but maybe this would turn out to be a good thing. I had feared humiliation, but maybe public disgrace was exactly what I needed. Maybe now I would be able to stop.

Allie reacted with hurt and disappointment to the news that I had been caught in an adult bookstore. Equally painful was the very real possibility that we would soon become the hottest news on the church prayer chain. Both of us were relieved, therefore, when the pastor called a couple days later to say that the elders had decided to deal quietly with my sin. I would not be required to confess before the entire congregation, and no explanations would be given for my sudden disappearance from volunteer positions. In exchange, I would need to become accountable. One of the elders had volunteered to become my accountability partner. He would meet with me weekly, pray with me, offer guidance, and monitor my progress in the area of sexual integrity.

This was the best possible outcome! Accountability was the solution I needed, the motivator strong enough to keep me between the lines. By reporting regularly to someone whose life was a model of rectitude, I would finally be able to overcome my sexual insanity and become a virtuous man.

With a huge sigh of relief, I said yes.

## Chapter 2

# **WHY ACCOUNTABILITY DIDN'T WORK**

**M**y new parole officer—er, accountability partner—seemed tailor-made. He was exemplary in every way and not at all intimidating. A professional pilot with a military background, Dennis was a man you could trust to stay calm and rational in any situation, no matter how stressful. He was soft-spoken and compassionate and genuinely interested in helping me. Allie and I were thrilled he had volunteered for the job.

Dennis asked me to meet him at a local diner for breakfast. There, after praying over our bacon and eggs, he assured me that he was on my side. He asked about my history with porn, so I gave him an abbreviated account of my lifelong struggle. He didn't press me for details, and I didn't offer very many. I chose my words carefully, using sanitized terms when talking about porn and avoiding any mention of prostitution or other extracurricular activities. I made it clear that I had never been attracted to child porn or gay porn and that I had never had an affair, doing my best to convey the impression that my sin was not nearly as bad as it might have been. Thankfully, that part of my life was now over. With the help of accountability, I was quite

certain I would finally be able to resist temptation. Dennis suggested we meet weekly, and I quickly agreed. I thanked him profusely for his help and promised to tell the truth the following week.

By our next meeting, however, I was already lying. I had managed to stay away from the adult bookstores and sex shops that week, but my anxiety over a looming deadline at work had driven me to the Internet, where I had discovered a huge reservoir of sexually explicit images. I had only indulged for a few minutes before shutting my computer down and walking away, but that was enough to give me a solid jolt of dopamine. I had dealt with that slip privately, using prayer and Bible-reading, so by the time I met with Dennis three days later, the whole episode seemed like ancient history. When Dennis asked how I was doing, I said “fine” and quickly added that I had not visited any adult bookstores. He told me to keep it up.

I did keep it up. Later that day, I went back to the Internet and searched for more porn, this time staying over an hour. By the end of the week, I was going to the Internet every day. From there, it was a short trip back to the adult bookstore, and I could see strip clubs and prostitutes on the horizon.

At our next breakfast, I admitted to Dennis that I had been dealing with sexual temptation. I said I had accidentally run across something on the Internet that had triggered the old urge. He nodded, his expression neutral, but I thought I could read disappointment in his eyes, so like a tightrope walker in a high wind I instantly adjusted my story. I told him I had *almost* given in. That was close! Dennis nodded again, and I felt like his good opinion of me hadn’t suffered too much. We talked awhile about the nature of spiritual warfare and then prayed. Walking back to the car, I made a fresh resolution to clean up my act so I wouldn’t have to lie to Dennis anymore.

Looking back on it today, I can see my accountability arrangement with Dennis was doomed from the start. I'm not saying accountability itself is a bad thing. This book, for example, is taking shape because I set a goal of writing it and shared that goal with my wife and several friends, then made a commitment to a distributor to complete the book by a specific date. I have a formal accountability relationship with the distributor, who emails me periodically to ask how the book is coming along, and my wife and friends are watching to see that I am actually devoting time to writing it. Without this kind of formal and informal accountability, I might very well have found something more interesting and less difficult to do and abandoned this project.

When it comes to addiction, however, accountability is not enough. In fact, the wrong kind of accountability can make matters worse, driving the addict even deeper into denial and deceit. In my case, there were at least five reasons accountability didn't work.

### **Reason #1: I Was an Addict**

The arrangement I made with Dennis assumed that in the days between our weekly meetings I would be able to resist temptation all by myself. It assumed, in other words, that I still possessed the power of choice when it came to sex. This assumption was appealing, but it ignored one uncomfortable reality: I had become addicted.

I'm not stupid. I was well aware, on a cognitive level, that my constant pursuit of illicit sex did not make sense. The costs were high, the risks were insane, and the payoff was lousy. Every time I left a strip club or whorehouse or logged off the Internet, I felt sick to my stomach and vowed never to do that again. I kept redoubling my devotional efforts, turning over one new leaf after another, but I always returned to the same crazy behavior. Why?

## *Beyond Accountability*

Anyone who has spent much time in church has probably heard the Apostle Paul's description of addictive behavior, which I think is the best one ever written. It goes like this:

I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.<sup>1</sup>

Bear in mind that these words were not written by a spiritual novice. The Apostle Paul was a Christian superstar, the author of roughly half of the books in the New Testament, and he made this startling confession near the end of his life. Even though Paul had been a committed Christ-follower for many years, he admitted that he still struggled unsuccessfully with unwanted sinful behavior. There was at least one area in his life where willpower was insufficient and his best intentions were consistently blocked.<sup>2</sup> Here's how he explained what was really going on:

Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.<sup>3</sup>

Did you catch that repeated phrase in the last sentence? The Apostle described something happening “in my members,” something physical, a resident evil that opposed his best intentions and overwhelmed his moral resolutions. He was not saying his body was evil, but that something evil had invaded his body. It was in him now. Sin was inside him, living at the cellular level, dwelling in the members of his body. Sin had made him physically sick, and that sickness was manifesting itself in sinful behavior.



These days, addiction specialists frequently describe addiction as a “conditioned physical response.” Modern medical research has shown that the human body is incredibly complex and adaptable and is always seeking equilibrium. Far below the level of conscious thought, your body is constantly adjusting to whatever you’re doing, subtly shifting in order to maintain balance among the chemicals, cells, and systems of cells that keep you going. Because of this capacity for change, you can physically alter the structure of your brain, nerves, and endocrine system simply through behavior—or even through thought.

The development of an addiction, it seems, goes like this: as I initiate or am forced to engage in a new behavior for which there is some pleasurable payoff, my body responds. My brain starts to form neural pathways, and chemical receptors throughout my body are conditioned in a way that will make it easier for me to repeat this behavior. If I do it again, the neural pathways are widened and extended, making it more likely that I will repeat the behavior. I may continue down this path freely for quite some time, but one day I cross an invisible line, and suddenly what began as a volitional act becomes automatic. I may still pretend I can stop, and I may even be able to stop for a while, but I am all but certain to return to the behavior eventually. Even though I recognize that what I’m doing is killing me, I am powerless to stop. Resolution has become worthless. The sin is in me now. It has made me sick. I am addicted and I need healing.

## **Reason #2: The Arrangement Was Shame-Based**

“You should be ashamed of yourself. I am SO ashamed of you.”

These words, often uttered by my father, still echo from my childhood. They were not spoken in malice; my father’s intention was to

communicate his disapproval in the strongest terms in order to correct some unacceptable aspect of my behavior. He could make the same statement non-verbally, with a penetrating look that exposed my folly or an averted gaze that said I was unworthy of his attention. Either way, it always worked: a jolt of panic, a flush of embarrassment, a surge of anger directed inward, and I would apologize and comply.

Shame. As a tool for short-term behavior modification, it is remarkably effective. But what are its side effects? What does shame produce over time?

It's interesting to note that in the Bible, the idyllic life is portrayed as shame-free. In the story of Adam and Eve, the writer of Genesis goes out of his way to make this point, saying, "the man and his wife were both naked *and were not ashamed*."<sup>4</sup> In other words, neither Adam nor Eve felt any need to cover up. They walked around Eden naked as jaybirds, not even bothering to get dressed when God arrived in the cool of the day. Then, man, woman, and God would walk through the garden together, enjoying each other's company.

When Adam and Eve made the fateful mistake of ignoring the one limitation God had placed on them, the immediate consequence was shame: "Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths."<sup>5</sup> Even though there had never been any secrets between them, the man and woman were suddenly seized by a deep and urgent impulse to turn away from each other and cover up. When God arrived for his daily walk through the garden, they hid from him!

This, incidentally, is where the story in Genesis diverges from the description of God I internalized as a child. As I understood it back then, sin is the one thing that God cannot tolerate. God is holy, and sin is his kryptonite. That's why he banished Adam and Eve from the

garden, because he can never be in the presence of sin. Sure, I can receive forgiveness and enter a relationship with God by grace through faith, but the moment I sin again, I “fall from grace” and am banished from God’s presence until I straighten up, acknowledge my sin, and repent. Then, God can stand to be around me again.

If my childhood understanding of God were really accurate, God would have cancelled his daily walk with Adam and Eve the moment they rebelled. But that’s not how the story goes. Although he certainly knew that Adam and Eve had broken the commandment, God showed up for their evening walk right on time, ready to resume the conversation. Our Heavenly Father did not avoid his rebellious children; he pursued them, and when they finally came out of hiding, he provided a covering for their shame.

During my years of active addiction, I agonized endlessly over my guilt, convinced that God left me every time I sinned. Sunday after Sunday, I would beg him for forgiveness, not understanding that my guilt was no longer an issue. During the Easter season, graphic descriptions of the bloody, painful death Jesus endured on the cross intensified my sense of guilt, and I truly believed God was as obsessed with my guilt as I was.

Here’s the thing. For every one reference to guilt in the Bible, it references shame *eight times!*<sup>6</sup> From a biblical point of view, shame is a much bigger deal than guilt. That’s why the symbolism of the cross is so significant. Yes, Jesus chose to embrace a painful, bloody death as an atonement for my guilt, but he also chose the most shameful death possible—to be stripped and beaten, spat upon, ridiculed, paraded through the streets, then hoisted high in the air, spread-eagle and completely naked, facing the city—*because he was dying for my shame*. In that death, the shame was greater than the pain. On the

cross, God was confronting my impulse to cover up and run away, to hide from him and everybody else every time I fail. The message of the cross is that God has provided a covering for my guilt and shame.

It's ironic, then, that I expended so much energy trying to shame my way out of addiction. After every failure, I would lecture myself, mimicking voices from my childhood: *"You should be ashamed of yourself. I am so ashamed of you."* If only I could hate my sin or hate myself enough, I thought, *I would be able to stop*, but this is a strategy that never worked. As it turns out, there is no bottom to the shame spiral.

I imported this shaming tactic into my arrangement with Dennis. He might not have been aware of what I was doing, because Dennis was not the kind of guy who would ever say, "I am so ashamed of you." Still, it was clear to me that the whole purpose of my accountability relationship with Dennis was to control my sexual behavior. If I failed to meet his performance standards, our relationship would change, and probably, after he reported my progress to the elders, drastic disciplinary measures and public humiliation would follow. *My need to please Dennis, together with my fear of abandonment and disgrace, I reasoned, should be enough to keep me away from porn and prostitutes.*

This was a shame-based accountability arrangement, and it produced the predictable effect. As soon as I slipped again, I hid and started lying.

### **Reason #3: I Am a Very Good Liar**

I don't know exactly when I stopped telling the truth, but I do remember being spanked for lying when I was six or seven years old, and during adolescence I once spent an entire afternoon at our dining

room table writing out this verse from the King James Version of the Bible over and over as a punishment for lying:

But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.<sup>7</sup>

My parents' efforts to stop me from lying didn't work. The harsher the consequences, the more inventive I became. And I didn't just lie to avoid punishment. I also created fabulous fictions to win approval from adults or gain the admiration of my peers—a habit I carried into adulthood.

For me, the fine art of lying was not limited to the fabrication of falsehoods. I could lull you to sleep with small talk. Or, like a parlor magician, I could employ misdirection, using drama or controversy to distract you from what I was really doing. In an emergency, I could change the subject or simply disappear, abandoning you in mid-sentence.

As my addiction progressed, lying became increasingly frequent, practically automatic. Telling the truth was never my main concern; my primary aim was to protect myself. To cover my tracks and avoid prosecution I improvised constantly, layering story upon story until even I could no longer distinguish fact from fiction. I lied reflexively, sometimes even when the truth would have served me better than the story I made up.

Every addict perfects the ability to construct a convincing lie. The key, we soon learn, is to spin a plausible narrative and persuade ourselves to believe it. After we have lied to ourselves successfully, our efforts to persuade others carry the power of sincerity. My accountability arrangement with Dennis was premised on the understanding

that I would tell him the truth. There was only one problem: I am a very good liar, and my artful avoidance of the truth carried the power of sincerity because I was living in denial.

#### **Reason #4: Denial is Real**

When I look back over my decades of active addiction, one thing is blindingly obvious: my sexual behavior was insane. Anyone with half a brain would have taken stock and stopped, but because I was operating in denial I continued acting against my own self-interest for years.

The reality-warping capabilities of denial are truly astonishing. With denial, I can edit my awareness, creating my own version of any experience. I can modify my memories, erasing or rewriting any scene I don't like. With denial, I can cut everyone else out of the frame and pretend that I am the only person affected by my actions. I can alter scale, comparing myself with a much bigger train wreck in order to make it appear that what I'm doing is no big deal. With denial, I can shift focus, blaming another person or some institution or circumstance for my choices. I can create a false ending by convincing myself I've quit, I'm done, it's over. Or I can simply dissociate.

The terms of my accountability contract stated that I would give Dennis an account of my sexual behavior at every weekly meeting, an arrangement that assumed I was capable of delivering accurate reports. This was a fatal assumption, because it ignored the degree to which my experience was constantly being distorted by denial. With denial, I could make myself believe last Tuesday's slip happened a month ago. With denial, I could minimize any danger, forget any failure. Because denial is real, I had become an unreliable witness to my own slow-mo-

tion suicide, and once-a-week check-ins with Dennis were never going to shatter that delusional world.

### **Reason #5: Sex Was Not My Biggest Problem**

Our accountability arrangement was constructed on the premise that my problem was a sexual one, which was an assumption that seemed sound. After all, it was my sexual sin that had provoked the elders to take action, and I was meeting with Dennis each week to report on my battle against lust. *As long as I stayed away from porn and prostitutes, I believed, I would be fine.* Heck, in all other respects I was a model Christian—practically Husband and Father of the Year!

My wife had a somewhat different perspective on our marriage. Publicly, Allie always maintained that she was the luckiest woman in the world, but privately she suffered. Addicts are self-centered in the extreme, and I am no exception. Years later, Allie would say that what had hurt her the most (even more than my infidelity) was the condescending way I treated her, the unrelenting egocentricity that left her feeling invisible, alone, worthless, inadequate, and stupid.

What made my behavior all the more mystifying and infuriating was its unpredictability, for there were times when I actually did behave like a model husband and father. I might suddenly whisk the family away for an impromptu vacation, for example, or surprise my wife with a thoughtful gift. I might take one or both of our younger kids on an adventure. I might even do the dishes or fold the laundry. These were the actions I offered as proof that the only part of my life that really needed fixing was the sexual part.

The decision to focus accountability solely on my sexual behavior made sense to me because it followed standard church thinking. In

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the churches where I grew up, nothing drew artillery fire faster than sexual sin. Like the Pharisees of Jesus' day, who shamed prostitutes and sentenced adulterers to death, the churches I knew always seemed to move quickly to isolate and eject anyone whose sexual failures had been exposed.<sup>8</sup>

Ironically, the Bible tells us that Jesus was unfailingly kind to sexual sinners. He went out of his way to associate with them, never endorsing their immoral behavior but always treating them with dignity and compassion. Jesus' contempt was reserved for those religious top performers who imagined that, because they did not cheat or commit adultery, they were not sinners, as desperately in need of God's grace as the thief or the whore. These, he said, were "like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean."<sup>9</sup>

Christ's attitude toward a shallow, one-dimensional view of sin is illustrated brilliantly in the story he told about the Pharisee and the tax collector:

"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."<sup>10</sup>

Although I didn't realize it at the time, my monomaniacal focus on correcting my sexual behavior was merely a manifestation of a deeper and more serious spiritual condition. I was not the repentant tax collector in Jesus' story. I was, ironically, self-righteous, employing



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accountability in an effort to recover my self-respect by addressing *the only problem I thought I had*. I wanted to control my sexual behavior, but I had no interest in examining the character defects and deeper wounds that had made that behavior possible. My goal, in essence, was to become a more successful Pharisee. God's goal, I soon learned, was entirely different.

## Chapter 3

### **A NEW WAY OF LIFE**

**M**y accountability relationship with Dennis only lasted a few months. Allie and I made the decision to switch churches, giving me a perfect excuse to let myself off the hook with Dennis. It was a relief not to be lying to him anymore. Bacon and eggs don't mix well with denial, and I had been leaving our breakfast conversations with heartburn every week.

By this time, I had more or less adjusted to the miserable rhythms of a double life. It had become clear to me that my best attempts to maintain sexual purity would always have the lifespan of a fruit fly, and years of asking God to deliver me from the tyranny of lust hadn't worked either. My only option, it seemed to me, was to contain the behavior as much as possible, do my best to compensate for my failures whenever I was home or in church, and concentrate on not getting caught.

Addiction, however, never stands still. My business was flourishing, taking me out of town for days at a time and generating plenty of money that could be siphoned into surreptitious activity. Life on the road was becoming increasingly chaotic, and my work performance was suffering. Just the click of the lock on an empty hotel room was enough to trigger a binge that might keep me up all night.

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It was on one of those trips, after fumbling through a disastrous presentation on a Friday afternoon, that I retrieved a voicemail from Allie asking me to call her right away. My pulse quickened. Had I slipped up? Did she know something? To my great relief, there was a jubilant tone in her voice when she answered the phone. She had just received fantastic news from our oldest son and his wife—we were going to be grandparents! And there was more! The expectant couple had recently moved from southern California to Middle Tennessee, and they wondered whether we might consider moving to Tennessee, too, to be close to the baby.

Rather than going home that evening, I flew to Nashville, then rented a car and drove down to Franklin, the town where our son and daughter-in-law had settled. On Saturday, a real estate agent showed me a few houses, including a Depression-era Craftsman-style bungalow a few blocks from Main Street. Back in Florida, Allie was praying for a specific kind of house, one with wood floors and a fireplace, a front porch, a backyard, and a sidewalk to downtown. This bungalow was creaky and leaky, but it matched what we were looking for, so we bought it. Two months later, we moved in.

I had just executed a classic maneuver, the so-called “geographic cure,” and it worked! Our first few weeks in Tennessee were idyllic. Allie and I spent our days scrubbing and painting and shopping for furniture, hanging curtains, planting flowers. We sat on the front porch in the evenings and talked, and on Sunday mornings, we walked hand-in-hand to church, almost like newlyweds. My sexual obsession evaporated, and I thought, *Wow! All that time, the problem was Florida!*

But then we started running out of money, and I started to get scared. So late one night, after Allie had fallen asleep, I reached for the

only fear medication I had ever used. Slipping out of bed, I tiptoed back to my office, fired up my computer, and started downloading porn.

I don't know how long I was there—time disappeared, as it always does when we're in a dissociated state—but suddenly I looked up to see Allie in the doorway, a look of shocked incomprehension on her face. She turned and left without saying a word. I quickly shut everything down and followed her back to the bedroom, apologizing and explaining, promising and begging. She forgave me, but a few weeks later, she found a condom on the floor in the bathroom that I could not explain. This time she sat me down on the edge of our bed and said, "I'm done. I still love you, but I don't like you. I don't trust you, I don't respect you, and I don't think you can ever change."

Four out of five men who seek help for sexually obsessive behavior do so only after receiving an ultimatum from a wife or girlfriend. I'm one of the four. Never before had I had been willing to disclose all the ugly details of my conduct to an outsider. Now, however, jolted by the very real prospect of losing my only friend, I scrambled for anything that might save me. I went back to the computer, typed "sex addiction Nashville" into a search engine, and hit the return key. To my astonishment, dozens of therapists, programs, and recovery groups appeared on my screen. I dialed the number of a 12-step program and left a message. A few minutes later, someone called back to tell me about a meeting scheduled for seven o'clock that night at a church in Nashville. I decided to go.

My life was about to change.

## **Encountering the Addicts**

Fifteen minutes before the start of the meeting, I was sitting in my car in a corner of the church parking lot. Other cars pulled up, and I

watched as drivers got out and went inside the basement door. I could not find the courage to get out of my car. At 7:15 I drove away. I spent the next hour driving aimlessly around Nashville, berating myself and coming up with the story I would tell my wife. The effort was unnecessary; Allie wasn't talking.

A couple days later, I was back in the parking lot, about to drive away for the second time, when I saw a guy I recognized from church. He was just a regular guy, but I had heard him speak up a few times in a men's Bible study, and there was something about him I liked. This guy seemed very comfortable in his own skin. He spoke simply and directly, as though he didn't need anyone's approval. It was clear he was a deeply committed Christian, but the most striking thing about him was that he talked about his sin in the present tense. I followed him inside.

I have written elsewhere about that evening and the weeks that followed, so I won't go into a whole lot of detail here.<sup>1</sup> Suffice it to say that my first 12-step recovery meeting was different from anything I had ever experienced in church. Never in my life had I heard such honesty, seen such humility, felt such empathy and kindness. I had never heard the words of Jesus like I heard them that night from a bunch of Samaritans who didn't even seem to know his proper name—they kept referring to him as a Higher Power.

After the meeting, during an informal meal at a Chinese restaurant, the guy from church agreed to become my temporary sponsor. He gave me copies of the "Big Book" and the "Twelve and Twelve" (what the textbooks of Alcoholics Anonymous are sometimes called) and instructed me to insert the word "lust" any time these books mentioned alcohol.<sup>2</sup> "All addicts share an inner architecture," he explained, "so we sex addicts can learn a lot from the alcoholics who pioneered the modern recovery movement."

At the same time, he cautioned me against the idea that by reading these books and mastering their concepts I would be able to think my way to freedom. “This is a program of action,” he said. “You have been trying to think your way to right acting, and you have been thinking and acting alone. We are going to show you how to act your way to right thinking, and to do it in the company of other men.”

He then went on to explain that the Twelve Steps would involve action of an unfamiliar kind, a new way of living that would feel awkward at first. I was accustomed to exerting myself. All of my previous campaigns to reform my behavior had relied on self-effort and a steely determination to gain control of my world. Those campaigns had all ended in failure, and there was no reason to believe future campaigns would end any differently. If I truly wanted a different outcome, I would have to stop trying to be my own savior. “In this battle,” he said, “victory begins with surrender.”

My sponsor and most of the other men in the group described themselves as “recovering sex addicts,” an appellation that made me wince. To me, “sex addict” sounded like “pervert” or “leper,” and I was not about to embrace such a defeatist designation. Besides, I told my sponsor, my identity is in Christ. I can’t be an addict.

“I don’t know whether you’re an addict or not,” my sponsor replied. “That is a question only you can answer. But I do know that for Christians, the answer is ultimately immaterial, because our identity is not based on our ability or inability to meet God’s standards of holiness. In fact, it is precisely because we are incapable of meeting those standards that Christ came and did for us what we could never do for ourselves. Christian addicts are a blessed bunch, because we cannot ignore our ongoing need for God for very long. When we surrender, we learn that God is kind. We are living proof that ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’”<sup>3</sup>

My sponsor gave me his phone number and asked me to start calling him every day. “You will probably find it hard to pick up the phone at first,” he said. “Most of us do. We addicts got ourselves into trouble by trusting our own instincts, doing our own thinking, making our own decisions. We didn’t trust anyone to advise us because we believed we were terminally unique. After all those years of solo living, the impulse to retreat into isolation and secrecy is hard to resist, especially when things aren’t going well. That’s why the daily phone call is so important. Picking up the phone is an admission that we need help. When we dial the number of another recovering addict we are making a decision to join the human race and we are trusting God to join the conversation.”

### The Four-Point Phone Call

“What do you want me to say when I call?” I asked my sponsor.

He smiled. “Simple. I want you to tell me four things:

“Tell me what you’re *feeling*.

“Tell me what you’re *thinking*.

“Tell me what you’re *doing*.

“Then, tell me what you’re *thinking of doing*.”

He then went on to explain that the sequence of these questions is very important. “Few men,” he said, “will voluntarily begin a conversation by stating their feelings. We like to imagine that we are purely rational beings—that we make our decisions from the neck up—but the Bible tells us otherwise. ‘Above all else, guard your heart,’ King Solomon says, ‘for it is the wellspring of life.’”<sup>4</sup>

As it turns out, we make most of our decisions for emotional reasons, and only later justify them with a big fat rationalization. At

any given moment, our emotional state is the best predictor of what we are likely to do next. Emotions are the language of the heart, but most of us have lost that language, so our own behavior continues to surprise and baffle us. “For years,” my sponsor said, “you have been doing irrational things for non-rational reasons, while trying to solve the problem by rational means. That’s why I want you to begin each phone call by telling me what you’re feeling.”

“Right now, I’m feeling okay,” I said.

“‘Okay’ is not a feeling,” he replied.

“Then, I guess I’m not feeling anything.”

He shook his head. “If you weren’t feeling anything, you’d be dead. It’s just that you’re not consciously *aware* of what you’re feeling—or you are censoring your emotions. That doesn’t stop them, by the way. It is possible to adjust or override your emotions, but you can do so only after you have honestly acknowledged them.” He then explained that we are all blessed with a spectrum of emotions, but for simplicity’s sake we can conceive of them in four major groups.

“Imagine that you’re standing in a room with four corners: Mad, Sad, Glad, and Afraid,” he said. “Pick a corner, walk over to it, and talk to me for at least 30 seconds.”<sup>5</sup>

“After you have checked in with your emotional state,” my sponsor said, “I want you to tell me what you’re thinking. Here’s why. If you’re like me, your brain is constantly chattering to itself. Somewhere between your ears you are always rehearsing stories, making plans, constructing explanations, anticipating outcomes. This is necessary activity, but at some point, you will inevitably make a false assumption, overlook a crucial piece of information, or draw an incorrect conclusion. If you are not checking your thinking with another person, you can lose track of the horizon and start to believe that the craziest things are true.”



“I’m certainly not omniscient,” my sponsor continued, “but when it comes to looking at your life, I do have the advantage of objectivity. There are whole parts of your life that you can’t see *because you’re inside it*. All of us need an outsider’s perspective. On our own, we walk in circles, but together, we can walk in straight lines. So after you tell me what you’re feeling, tell me what you’re thinking.”

“Got it,” I said. “Feeling, then thinking. What comes next?”

“Doing,” my sponsor said. “Tell me what you’re doing.”

“Why?”

“Simple. Whether we like to admit it or not, addicts have an almost limitless capacity for covert activity. Because we have learned how to talk in one direction while walking in another, we can wander toward a cliff while convincing ourselves and everybody else that we’re not in any danger.” He gave me a wry smile. “I relapsed a lot before I started keeping a sponsor updated on my activity. But after I started describing what I was doing, correlations began to emerge. I know now that there are certain activities and places I should avoid, not because they are morally wrong but because they tend to increase my vulnerability to lust. And if I can’t avoid them, I need to alert my sponsor so that he can pray for me and check on me until I’m out of danger.”

“Finally,” my sponsor said, “I want you to tell me what you’re *thinking of doing*. Here’s what I mean: tell me what that crazy voice in the back of your head is urging you to do. You know that voice, right?”

I nodded. “I’ve always thought of it as the devil.”

“Maybe it is. Or maybe it’s just your own sinful, frightened heart. Either way, the voice is relentless. You can silence it on your own when you are in your right mind, but there will come a day when you are going to need help. Someday, when you are all alone and exhausted,

that voice will become almost irresistible. If you have been keeping its suggestions secret, the odds that you are going to yield are high, but if you have disclosed that temptation to a brother, you can lean on your brother for help. Remember, we are all tempted, and temptation is not sin. So whenever that crazy voice in the back of your head tells you to do something stupid, don't stuff it; tell me about it."

Nearly two decades later, I still do my best to follow this structure when I make my daily check-ins, and I recommend it to others. These four simple questions are elegantly revealing. When I answer them truthfully, I am walking in the light, venturing beyond mere accountability, and making myself *accessible* to another human being.<sup>6</sup> As my relationship with my brother deepens through disclosure and feedback, I find that my behavior begins to change.

The Apostle John, who walked and talked with many men throughout his long career, described the process this way:

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.<sup>7</sup>

## Those Scary Steps

Eventually my sponsor led me through the Twelve Steps, that well-worn path of practical repentance that has carried millions of addicts of every persuasion—alcoholics and drug addicts, gambling addicts and food addicts, workaholics and many more types of addicts—into freedom. I wanted to rush through the steps on my own and figured I could finish them in about a week, but he told me that clarity comes slowly and nobody can do the steps alone. We would work each step as thoroughly as possible, he said, and when I finally finished, it would

be time to start again, because we never outgrow our need for repentance and healing.

The first challenge was for me to comprehend and admit the gravity of my situation, so my sponsor instructed me to write a history of my illicit sexual behavior, taking special note of every time I had drawn a line and crossed it. He then suggested I calculate how much money I had actually spent on my addiction over the course of twenty years. Working from memory (since I obviously hadn't kept receipts), I entered each week's estimated spending into a spreadsheet and totaled them all up. I was stunned by the result. According to my own calculations, I had spent \$300,000 on pornography and prostitutes.

Then, it dawned on me. The money was not the worst of it. *I had spent my children's childhood.* I had spent twenty years of my wife's life—twenty years of *my* life—trading my birthright, day after day, for a bowl of beans.

My sponsor looked over my work and set it aside. "Do you want to know what your biggest problem is?" he asked.

"It seems pretty obvious to me," I said, pointing at the spreadsheet.

He shook his head. "Your biggest problem, Nate, is that you think sex is your problem."

I blinked. *What was he talking about?*

"I'm not saying sex isn't *a* problem," he continued. "You need to stop and you can't stop on your own. God is ready to help you, and he will use people like me in the process, but if you think stopping that behavior is going to fix you and make you happy, you're crazy, *because sex is not your problem.* Sex is your favorite *solution.* It is the medication you have been using all these years to numb the pain caused by your deeper problems—and those problems, by the way, are common to man."

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He looked at me closely: “You need to understand that you and I are not in an accountability relationship. We are not doing sin management here. I am not the sex police. I am your friend, and as your friend, I am telling you that you are far sicker than you realize. You have a great deal of repenting and healing to do. We can talk about sex, certainly, but sex is not our focus. We are going to talk about pride and unbelief, fear and anger, resentment, self-centeredness and self-pity—heart issues. That’s where we’re going. And what lies at the end of this road is far better than abstinence. We are headed toward a spiritual awakening.”

His words turned out to be prophetic. My first trip through the Twelve Steps opened doors and windows on the gospel I had never seen. Grace came in waves, and God felt near. As I catalogued my character defects and surrendered them to God, real change began to take place. As I made amends to people I had harmed, relationships were born or reborn. There were many days, frankly, when it felt like I was becoming a Christian for the first time.

Although I was working the Steps in a structured way, most of my time with my sponsor was spent in informal conversation, and soon I was hanging out with other recovering addicts, as well. We shared meals, went for walks, talked on the phone. I have always been a fairly outgoing person, so the fact that I was making friends was not remarkable in itself, but these friendships were qualitatively different from any I had formed before, because I was not hiding. I was bringing my whole self to these conversations, light and shadow, without pretending to be anyone else. Here, in these authentic relationships, I found that Jesus still honors the promise he made to his first disciples:

For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.<sup>8</sup>

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It has now been eighteen years since my recovery journey began. I enjoy a marvelous freedom today, but I have not developed an immunity to lust. In that sense, I am still an addict, as desperately in need of God's mercy as the first day I walked through the door. I know that no matter how far down the road of recovery I go, I will always be the same distance from the ditch. I have learned that freedom is fragile. God sends it to me one day at a time, and I must be humble enough to go out every day and pick it up, like manna. I protect it with the help of boundaries and brothers, and I keep it by giving it away. That's why I've written this book.

## Epilogue

Allie didn't leave.

After my disclosure, a Christian counselor helped us work out the terms of a temporary in-house separation, and for the next couple of years, I worked on my recovery while Allie dealt with the aftermath of my betrayal.

My sponsor cautioned me against pressing Allie for a quick reconciliation: "There are no shortcuts to forgiveness," he said. "We cannot forgive something we are unwilling to feel. Allie is made in the image of God, and even his forgiveness came through the pain of the cross. Quick forgiveness, when the wounds run deep, is not really forgiveness at all, but denial of reality. If your wife tries to forgive too soon, she will simply bury the pain, where it will fester for years, poisoning your marriage. So, for now, your job is to allow your wife to be as angry as she needs to be for as long as she needs to be angry."

While I was making my first trip through the Twelve Steps, Allie was doing spiritual work of a similar kind, thanks to a small group Bible study called [\*Gospel Transformation\*](#), hosted by our church.<sup>9</sup> Both of us eventually went into counseling, including trauma therapy. Allie spent a month at a treatment center in Kentucky, and I did a week of intensive group therapy at a marvelous center called [\*Onsite\*](#).

Today, Allie will tell you that she has been married to two men named Nate Larkin. She says that as hard as those first twenty years were, she would take them again in a heartbeat to get the last eighteen. And what's more, our life now has a purpose it didn't have before.

## The Samson Society

In 2004, with Allie's encouragement and the assistance of several friends, I started a group in our church called the Samson Society. Samson is not a 12-step group, but it carries the spirit of 12-step recovery.<sup>10</sup> It is not a group for sex addicts, but sex addicts are welcome. Every meeting of the Society opens with this description:

Welcome to this meeting of the Samson Society. We are a *company of Christian men*. We are also:

- Natural *loners*—who have recognized the dangers of isolation and are determined to escape them,
- Natural *wanderers*—who are finding spiritual peace and prosperity at home,
- Natural *liars*—who are now finding freedom in the truth,
- Natural *judges*—who are learning how to judge ourselves aright,
- Natural *strongmen*—who are experiencing God's strength as we admit our weaknesses.

Samson meetings don't operate like a Bible study or the kind of discussion group most of us are used to. We begin each standard meeting with this explanation:

As Christians, we meet at other times for worship, for teaching, or for corporate prayer. Today, however, we meet to talk. Our purpose is to assist one another in our common journey. We do so by sharing honestly, out of our own personal experience, the challenges and encouragements of daily Christian living in a fallen world.

Leadership of a Samson meeting does not rely on any one person, but rotates from week to week, and there are no designated teachers. Anyone who can read can lead. We rely on the Holy Spirit to speak to each man during the sharing time, and we remind ourselves of a few simple rules before the sharing time begins:

## *Beyond Accountability*

In sharing, we speak **honestly** out of our own experience. We tell the truth about ourselves, knowing that our brothers will listen to us in love and will hold whatever we say in **strictest confidence**. We try to keep our comments brief, taking care to leave plenty of time for others. We address our statements to the group as a whole rather than directing them toward any one person. As a rule, we refrain from giving advice to others or instructing them during the meeting, believing that such conversations are best reserved for private moments between friends.

The weekly meeting of the Samson Society is a safe place for us to bring our real selves and say the real truth. The meetings are powerful, and after each meeting, we adjourn to a conversation-friendly location, such as a pub or a coffee shop, for a time of informal fellowship we call “the meeting-after-the-meeting.”

As wonderful as these get-togethers are, the Samson Society is not about the meetings. Samson actually lives *between* the meetings, in daily conversations between friends. We operate with the conviction that on any given day, every man needs help and every man has some help to give.

Each man is encouraged to select someone we call a “Silas” and call his Silas every day. The Silas is not an authority, but a “trustworthy traveling companion for this stretch of the road.” With the help of our Silas, we explore the course of consequences of our attempts to live apart from God. We make further progress by developing the daily disciplines of prayer, study, and self-examination. And in order to keep from becoming obsessively self-focused, we offer ourselves as a Silas to others, asking God each day for the grace to seek his kingdom rather than our own and serve those he places in our path rather than serving ourselves.

The story of the original Samson group was published in 2007 under the title [\*Samson and the Pirate Monks: Calling Men to Authentic Fellowship\*](#), and in the decade that followed, more than 450 other



Samson groups were launched by men who had read the book. In addition, 10,000 men registered as members on the Samson Society [website](#). It was the realization that most of the men on the website had not found a group and that many of the groups had faltered that impelled a number of men to form an independent, nonprofit organization in July 2017 called Samson House.

The purpose of Samson House is to support the health and growth of the Samson Society, and one of its first initiatives is extremely innovative. Beginning in January 2018, the Samson Society website will support virtual meetings. These meetings will feel very much like physical meetings and will include breakout sessions, during which every man who attends will be given an opportunity to speak. In addition, members will be able to activate a brand-new Silas app, available from the Apple App Store or Google Play, which will allow them, with certain safeguards and limitations, to interact with the men they've met in meetings. With the push of a button, a man will be able to ask someone to be his Silas, and the app will help him track his daily phone calls. Not only that, but any Samson guy with a track record of helpful interaction can be authorized to serve strangers using the app. Like a driver for Uber or Lyft, he will be able to sign in to the system for a selected length of time. There is a button on the app labeled, "Call Available Pirate Monk." Anyone in the world who pushes that emergency button will see a listing of Samson guys who are available at that moment for a conversation.

The vision for Samson House is continuing to expand. Some men are dreaming about brick-and-mortar "Samson houses," communal housing for men whose behavior has temporarily forced them from their homes. Others have proposed a publishing house for recovery-themed art and instruction, while still others are drawn to developing retreats, conferences, or mentoring centers.

## *Beyond Accountability*

There is no telling what the future holds for the Samson Society, but one thing is certain: as long as we continue to press beyond mere accountability to engage our broken brothers in authentic Christian friendship, the transformational power of the Holy Spirit will continue to flow through our fellowship to change lives.

# Endnotes

## Chapter 1

1. 2 Corinthians 5:17, KJV.

2. I am well aware that the proposition “porn is wrong” is laughable by the standards of contemporary culture, but I am entirely convinced that it is true and I am not alone in thinking so. Research in the fields of psychology, sociology, and criminology has led a growing number of experts to conclude that porn, especially internet porn, is altering our society in dangerous ways. Porn is short-circuiting the emotional development of younger users and rewiring the brains of chronic users. It is eroding our willingness and our ability to form the kinds of lasting, nurturing relationships that a society needs to survive. These troubling trends, together with research linking porn to the sexual exploitation of children and violence toward women, have convinced a number of policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic to declare unrestricted access to porn a threat to public health. Although the porn industry has successfully argued in the past that any limitation on porn is an unconstitutional infringement of free speech, I am hopeful that the accumulating evidence of porn’s harmful effects will finally convince us to take sane, protective measures before it is too late.

## Chapter 2

1. Romans 7:18-19.

2. In the holiness tradition in which I grew up, preachers tried to explain this passage away by claiming that Paul was describing his experience prior to conversion. The text clearly says otherwise. Paul is writing in the present tense.

3. Romans 7:19-23.

4. Genesis 2:25.

5. Genesis 3:7.

6. This is based on an English reading of the KJV, where I find 30 occurrences of “guilt” or “guilty” and 240 mentions of “shame,” “ashamed,” “shamed,” or “unashamed.”

7. Revelation 21:8.

8. The church’s impulse to shame and exclude sexual sinners is most often justified by a passage in Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth, in which the Apostle chastised the church for accepting “such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father’s wife” (5:1, KJV). The clear implication of this verse is that the sin is blatant and the sinner is unrepentant. Paul instructed the church to “deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Corinthians 5:5, KJV). Usually overlooked, however, are the Apostle’s instructions to the same church in a subsequent letter: “Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather

turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him” (2 Corinthians 2:5-8). Paul gave the same directions for dealing with a repentant sinner when he wrote to the church in Galatia: “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted” (Galatians 6:1).

9. Matthew 23:27, NIV.

10. Luke 18:10-14.

### **Chapter 3**

1. [\*Samson and the Pirate Monks: Calling Men to Authentic Brotherhood\*](#) (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007).

2. Anonymous, [\*Alcoholics Anonymous: The Big Book\*](#), 4th edition (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous Services, Inc, 2001), and Anonymous, [\*The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions\*](#) (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous Publishing, 1952).

3. 1 Peter 5:5, NIV.

4. Proverbs 4:23, NIV.

5. There are several valid ways to understand our emotions. The most helpful, in my view, is presented by Chip Dodd in his book [\*Voices of the Heart: A Call to Full Living\*](#), 2nd edition (Nashville: Sage Hill Resources, 2015). Dodd explains that there is an impaired side and a gifted side to each emotion and he includes shame in his list of Eight Feelings.

6. I am indebted to Michael John Cusick for the language of accessibility. His book [\*Surfing for God: Discovering the Divine Desire Beneath Sexual Struggle\*](#) (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012) is a must-read for any Christian battling Internet pornography.

7. 1 John 1:7.

8. Matthew 18:20, RSV.

9. 2nd edition (Jenkintown: World Harvest Mission, 2006).

10. There are other Christian recovery programs that do follow the 12-step model. By far the most successful is [\*Celebrate Recovery\*](#), an international organization with excellent resources that I highly recommend. There is a Celebrate Recovery group in the church Allie and I attend.

## About the Author

Nate Larkin is a preacher's kid, the oldest of ten. He earned an undergraduate degree from St. Lawrence University, where he majored in Religious Studies, and an M.Div. from Princeton Theological Seminary, where he majored in preaching and won the preaching prize in 1982.

Nate is the founder of Samson House and co-host of the Pirate Monk Podcast. He travels extensively as a retreat leader and conference speaker, but he never travels alone. Whenever his wife does not accompany him, another member of the Samson Society travels with him.

Nate and Allie have three children and seven grandchildren. They live in Franklin, Tennessee, where they enjoy the family atmosphere of small-town life.

## Author's Recommended Reading

- Patrick Carnes, [Out of the Shadows: Understanding Sexual Addiction](#)
- Matt Fradd, [The Porn Myth: Exposing the Reality Behind the Fantasy of Pornography](#)
- Mark Laaser, [Healing the Wounds of Sexual Addiction](#)
- Heath Lambert, [Finally Free: Fighting for Purity with the Power of Grace](#)
- T.C. Ryan, [Ashamed No More: A Pastor's Journey Through Sex Addiction](#)
- Gary Skinner, [Treating Pornography Addiction: The Essential Tools for Recovery](#)
- Ken Snyder, [Cross Road: A Journey from Sex to Sanity](#)
- William Struthers, [Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain](#)
- Vicki Tiede, [When Your Husband Is Addicted to Pornography: Healing Your Wounded Heart](#)
- Gary Wilson, [Your Brain on Porn: Internet Pornography and the Emerging Science of Addiction](#)



# CHARTER OF THE SAMSON SOCIETY

## THE FACT

1. God exists. In the timeless mystery of the Trinity, He is perfectly harmonious, perfectly whole.
2. God is our Creator. He designed us to live in eternal harmony with Him and each other, and to care for the rest of His creation.
3. Spurning God's fellowship, we all have sinned, forfeiting our created place and losing our spiritual lives.
4. I myself have personally defied God's law and rejected His love. Alienation from Him has produced darkness and chaos in my life, for which I have often blamed others.
5. God has continued to love me, even in my active rebellion, and in Christ has done everything necessary to restore me perfectly to Himself.
6. As I accept responsibility for my sin and find forgiveness in the finished work of Christ, I experience reconciliation with God and am progressively restored to harmony with myself and others.
7. Despite the lingering effects of sin, I am a restored son of the sovereign Lord, whose Spirit is at work in my weakness, displaying His glory and advancing His kingdom.

## THE PATH

1. Believing The Fact, I surrender to God in simple faith — making no promises, but merely asking for His aid.
2. I start attending meetings of the Society, and from its members I select a *Silas*, a trustworthy traveling companion for this stretch of the road.
3. In honest detail, I describe to God and to my *Silas* the course and consequences of my attempts to live apart from God.
4. Encouraged by my *Silas* and others, I develop the daily disciplines of prayer, study and self-examination. I abandon self-help, asking God instead to do for me what I cannot do for myself.
5. I choose to trust the Body of Christ, weighing the wisdom of my friends when facing decisions and seeking their strength when confronted by temptation.
6. When I can do so without injuring anyone, I make amends for damage I have caused. If direct amends are impossible or inadvisable, I demonstrate my repentance in other ways.
7. I offer myself as a *Silas* to others. Each day I ask God for the grace to seek His kingdom rather than my own, to serve those He places in my path rather than serving myself.

## THE PACT

1. God is the sole owner of the Samson Society and its only authority. No member may speak for the entire Society.
2. All members of the Society are equals — friends and fellow servants, bound by love and honor. No member may command the obedience of another.
3. The Society owns no property, collects no dues or fees, pays no salaries, incurs no debts.
4. The Society is an extension of the Church Universal. It is not a corporate entity and can make no contracts with congregations, denominations, causes or campaigns, regardless of their merit.
5. Any two or more persons who believe the Fact, who agree to follow this Path and join this Pact, may initiate a meeting of the Samson Society.
6. We hold in strictest confidence any personal information shared by other members, unless permission to divulge it is given by any whom its disclosure might affect.
7. Members are fully authorized to create and distribute, freely or for profit, personal explanations and applications of the Society's principles — if they neither alter nor violate its Charter and do not

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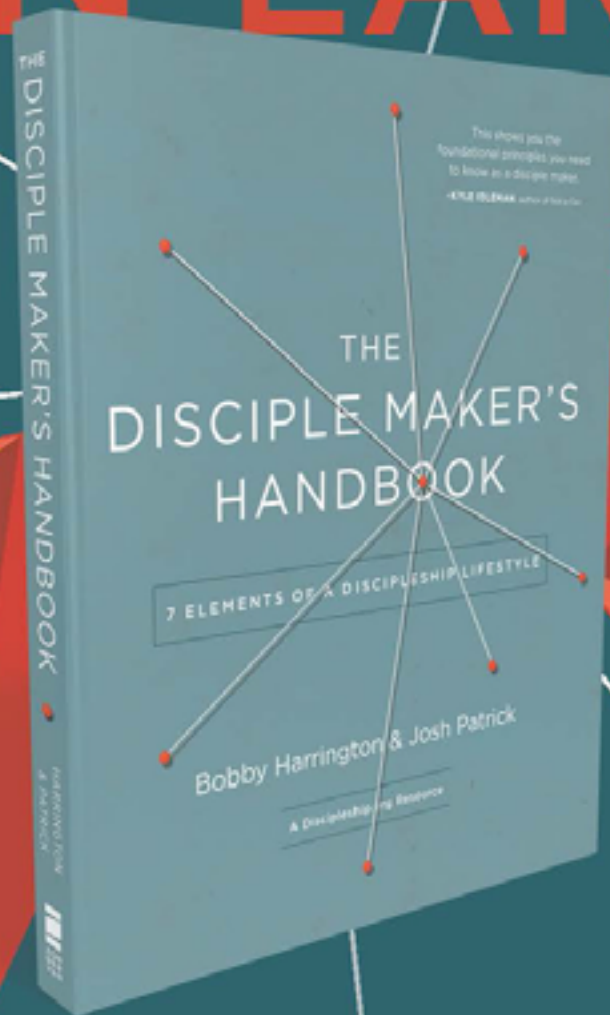
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