



High-tech temptation

Ministering to those caught in sin

*The third article in a three-part series
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When Robert's* wife kicked him out of the house because of his addiction to Internet pornography, she told him he had a spiritual problem. Fortunately, in addition to his clothes, Robert took his Bible with him to the motel.

Robert's world had come crashing down around him. He sought solace in Scripture and looked up *shame* in the topical index, where he was directed to Psalm 51. This psalm of David connected to Robert's soul as he read the words: "Create in me a clean heart, O God..."

Robert asked his pastor for help and was referred to a Christian counsellor. He remembers the counsellor gave him hope in the first session by recounting how Jesus forgave a woman about to be stoned for adultery. In time, Robert's wife agreed to go to counselling with him. She eventually invited him to move back home, but forgiveness and trust came after many months.

Today Robert and his wife are closer than ever. They read God's Word together and pray daily. Even when Robert works on the road, they pray over the phone. As Robert reflects on what was most important in his personal healing and the restoration of his marriage, he says God's forgiveness was key. He adds that praying and being in God's Word daily gives him the strength to overcome temptation and live his new life in Christ.

Restoring one ensnared by sin

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted (Galatians 6:1).

Our natural responses to learning about a horrific sin often include shock, anger, grief and even bitterness.

* True story; name and certain facts changed to protect confidentiality.

This is especially true when we feel betrayed or deeply hurt by one we love. And yet in God's eyes, all our sins are horrible and deserving of His wrath and anger. "For the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

Therefore God teaches us to work together as forgiven sinners to restore one who is trapped by sin. In different ways we all need help to see our sin and be restored to "fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith...Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (Hebrews 12:2-3).

The same applies to our personal struggles with sexual temptation and restoring others around us who have become trapped in their sin. Accordingly, we can apply God's Word in ministering to those who fall prey to sexual temptation from TV, satellite radio, the Internet, cell phone or any other media.

Law/Gospel approach for overcoming idolatry, including addictive behaviour

Addressing sexual sin (and any other sinful habits) through Gospel-based strategies calls for these basic components: repentance, confession and absolution, and accountability. To address the spiritual issues we must gently confront the sin and idolatry, encourage repentance and confession, apply God's grace in forgiveness, and provide accountability for amending the sinful behavior. These may be summarized as follows:

- Application of Law (Scripture, civil law, company policies, requirements, behavioural change) does not change the heart but does prepare the sinner for receiving the Gospel. It also serves as a guide for living a God-pleasing life.

- Application of Gospel (the good news of our forgiveness from God) heals us in forgiveness, changes our hearts and gives power to amend our sinful lives.

- Behaviour modification (avoiding sinful patterns and developing new habits) is a necessary part of repentance but is empowered by the Gospel.

- Accountability (a form of Christian discipline) is necessary to implement change, replace sinful habits and aid repentance over time. Christian accountability also provides opportunity for continued application of the Gospel (announcing God’s grace).

Healing through confession and forgiveness

In many cases the church has given away the ministry of reconciliation to other sources of counselling and conflict resolution. While we need Christian counsellors and lawyers, professional counselling and legal advice do not replace the Church’s responsibility to restore those ensnared in sin (Gal. 6:1-2).

Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven” (John 20:21-23).

Influenced by our sinful world, Christians may become desensitized to sin and fail to recognize the sinfulness of certain kinds of behaviour—some we see around us and some we personally experience. At times we accept worldly rationalizations or excuses to avoid acknowledgement of sin. When this happens we doubt the Gospel is powerful and effective enough for addressing life’s tough issues. Instead we seek to resolve problems using worldly means without applying God’s Word of sin and grace.

Martin Luther said, “The more you minimize sin, the more will grace decline in value.”

God gave the Church the responsibility to proclaim His Law and Gospel. Through Word and Sacrament we receive God’s forgiveness and grow in grace. In issues such as sexual sin through technology, the message is the same: Repent and believe the Gospel. Christ’s death and resurrection provide the power to deal with *all* our sins, no matter how gross or secret or long-term they might be.

Behaviour modification and accountability

As noted in Part 2’s account of King David (2 Samuel 12:1-20), forgiveness does not necessarily remove earthly consequences. Part of the consequences

may include providing discipline (to change behaviour) and accountability (to help those caught in a pattern of sin). Accountability assists people in overcoming habits that contributed to their sinful behaviour. For example, a person recovering from alcoholism finds comfort in accountability groups and avoids specific behaviours that led to excessive drinking in the past. Without such support and changes, a person is

more vulnerable to repeating the pattern of sin.

In the body of Christ we carry each other’s burdens and seek to restore those ensnared by sin. The apostle Paul instructs: “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God” (Col. 3:15-16; see also Prov. 3:11-12; Matt. 18:15-17; Heb. 12:4-13). Teaching and admonishment, with Christ’s peace ruling our hearts, is the church’s responsibility.

The more you minimize sin, the more will grace decline in value

Practical suggestions to aid accountability

The fruit of repentance includes a desire to amend our sinful behaviour. Accountability can help promote that change and provide opportunity for more confession and forgiveness. These ideas can be applied to oneself or another:

- Arrange for accountability to mature Christians (friends, family members, co-workers, pastor, counsellor, support group).
- Identify accountability partner or partners who understand how to apply both Law and Gospel.
- Encourage a regular practice of private confession and absolution.
- If your pastor is not available, identify someone who can serve as a confessor.
- Provide for regular review of website access on computers and cell phones.
- Invite someone to monitor your computer history.
- Install software that reports—to your accountability network—all websites accessed.
- Encourage accountability partners to establish their own accountability network so they can resist temptation to view the same sites.
- Check e-mail attachments and cell phone photos.
- At work, home and school, keep computer screens turned on so others can view them at all times and not kept private.
- Enact a policy limiting online activity only to times when others are present (e.g., family members at home or other employees at work).
- In church, school and workplace, adopt a policy that all electronic communications (phone, computer, email, Internet, fax, cell phone, texting, etc.) using employer-sponsored equipment and subscriptions are property of the employer and subject to review at any time.
- Agree that the computer may be used only for specific tasks.
- Install Internet safety tools and screens, such as blocking software.

The fruit of repentance includes a desire to amend sinful living. In corporate confession, we pray for God's help to change: "Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways" we pray in the Divine Service. The Augsburg Confession explains that repentance consists of two parts, including contrition and absolution, and continues: "Then good works are bound to follow, which are the fruit of repentance." Living in repentance means to walk in a different direction. Those who want to do so often need help, especially when overcoming a long-practised habit.

Behaviour modification is never easy, but God promises the forgiven sinner divine power to change (2 Peter 1:3-4). To aid in changing our sinful habits, Christians are meant to hold one another accountable in love. Accountability is an important part of the healing process.

Those who have become addicted will often benefit from accountability and changed behaviour through the help of a pastor, Christian counsellor, a close network of Christian friends, or a guided support group. Through Word and Sacrament we receive forgiveness and are free to live the sanctified life. God calls gifted people to serve us as we learn to live under the cross.

Living under the cross

Praise God for his unfathomable love for us! For while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1).

Responding to sexual temptation in a high-tech society is no different from responding to any other temptation: gossip, pride, bitterness, resentment, denial of sin and more. We take all our sins, hurts, and brokenness and lay them at the foot of the cross.

To serve people suffering from new forms of temptation, we must be aware of what is happening around us. We cannot afford to ignore the dangers or fail to restore those suffering from secret sins. Neither can we be afraid to talk about sensitive issues, especially those Scripture speaks so much about.

Dealing with any form of idolatry requires application of God's Law and Gospel. God gives us one another in the body of Christ to gently restore one another through confession and forgiveness. His Word and Sacrament are means of grace through which we experience healing and are empowered to live the sanctified life. Christian counsellors and support groups can help provide accountability and give direction to the repentant sinner.

What a huge responsibility! What an awesome privilege! Together we pray for blessing: "May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing His will, and may He work in us what is pleasing to Him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen" (Hebrews 13:20-21).

For those with serious idolatry patterns (often referred to as addictions)

Professional counselling and accountability groups offer help for those who have become deeply ensnared in their idolatry and need more intense assistance in battling addictive behavior. Such individuals and their loved ones may find the following suggestions helpful.

- Counselling from a Christian professional who can:
- assist in identifying the impact of addiction on user and others.
- help in providing validation and accountability from a support group or spouse.
- encourage commitment to recovery and getting better before making major decisions.
- guide the user to confess to those who have been hurt by the activity.
- counsel user and loved ones to manage anger and other emotions.
- establish ground rules and boundaries.
- hold person accountable.
- encourage a practice of private confession and absolution
- Christ-centred 12-step programs (such as Celebrate Recovery) and guided support- group meetings can provide opportunities for individuals to:
- work with a sponsor or mentor for accountability.
- Re-establish relationships with friends who have been ignored.
- participate in group therapy.
- continue in ongoing recovery work.
- receive encouragement for active worship and fellowship in the congregation, including making use of the means of grace and practising private confession and forgiveness.

Seek to restore relationship with the person's family by

- confessing and forgiving one another for violations of trust and other wrongs.
- committing to marital counselling and rebuilding trust through accountability, loyalty and mutual responsibilities
- evaluating and addressing the impact on children and other family.
- practising family confession and forgiveness.

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Material for this series is adapted from the Bible study and DVD *Responding to Sexual Temptation in a High Tech Society* available from Ambassadors of Reconciliation and CPH.

Learn more about the Bible study and seminars being offered on this subject at www.hisaor.org.