

How to Pray When You're Tempted by Sexual Sin

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This article is part of the How to Pray series.

Sin Is a Personal Problem

You need to confess that your behavior always reveals more about you than about your situation, location, or relationships. It is here, I think, that the evangelical church has tended to lack honesty, integrity, and biblical accuracy. When it comes to the growing sexual insanity that exists in our churches (Internet pornography, marital adultery, and singles having sex), we have tended to point our fingers in the wrong direction. We have talked much about the shocking sexual degradation and coarseness of the surrounding culture.

And it is shocking. We talk about the sexual images from which it is almost impossible to protect our children. We point to the sexualization of the fashion and entertainment industries. And we should talk about those things. We talk about how the Internet has been morally kidnapped by a global, multibillion-dollar pornography empire. We talk about the moral insanity of high school health classes. We talk about how sexual humor infects even the family sitcom. All these things are issues and need discussion and action, but self-delusion and self-righteousness make the conversation hard and set us up for greater difficulty.

The sexual madness that lives in the seats of our Sunday services exposes and indicts the true condition of our hearts. The debt and materialism that live in our congregations reveal more about us than about the surrounding culture. Here's what's important about this chapter: when you tell yourself that the problem is not you, when you deny the centrality of your heart in every choice and action you make, and when you minimize the dangerous impurity that still lives inside you, you don't seek the help you desperately need, and you don't set up the protections that are clearly called for. As a result, you set yourself up to be seduced and deceived once again.

So What Now?

Well, we must all face the fact that changes in our personal sex life don't begin with cultural analysis; they begin with personal confession. Change doesn't begin with pointing to the difficulty of your situation or to the behavior of the people around you. Change begins in one place: with heart-deep confession. When it comes to sex, we all need to say that the biggest problem in our sexual lives is us.

I would challenge you to pray with me David's prayer of humble confession (Psalm 51).

Do it right here, right now.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!

For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you may be justified in your words
and blameless in your judgment.
Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
and in sin did my mother conceive me.
Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have broken rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.
Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.
O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.

For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
build up the walls of Jerusalem;
then will you delight in right sacrifices,
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

A Matter of the Heart

You see, if our sex problems are a matter of our hearts, if it is true that we do what we do because of what's in our hearts, then we need something more than cultural analysis, biblical information, and rules. Give a man who is addicted to Internet pornography a set of rules and see how far that takes him.

Sexual sin is a matter of the heart.

Our only hope for personal purity and for a defense against cultural insanity is found in the transformation of our hearts, and for that we need the very same mercy for which David cries out in this beautiful, heart-wrenching psalm. Won't you stop right now and cry out for the very same grace? You need it right now as much as David did, whether or not you admit that to yourself.

This article is adapted from Sex in a Broken World: How Christ Redeems What Sin Distorts by Paul David Tripp.

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