

FROM **DIRTY**
TO **DANCING**

**GOD'S GRACE FOR THOSE
STRUGGLING WITH PORNOGRAPHY**

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INTRODUCTION

From **מורטל** to Dancing

It was a dirty thing to say. “I want your money, Dad, not you!” But that is what the son said. Convinced he would be happier with cold hard cash than with his warmhearted dad, the son dared to speak those dirty words to his father. Before Dad could even dry the tears from his cheeks or say goodbye, the son packed his things. The boy grinned in expectation as he turned his face toward a new adventure and turned his back on the one who loved him before the day he was born.

It was a dirty place to go. The corners where girls winked at plain-faced guys as if they were drop-dead handsome. But that is where the son went. Lipstick and neon lights drew him to the places where pleasure was for sale. And he was buying. One girl, then another, then he lost track of the number. And he lost track of their names. Who had time for trivial things like conversation when there were more intoxicating ideas to explore?

It was a dirty thing to do. Squander the dollars his dad worked so hard for. But that is what the son did. The bank statements saw it coming, but who had time to open the mail when girls were begging for your attention? One day, his stash felt a little light. Opening the bag of coins his father had given him, the son rummaged around the empty wrappers and found . . . nothing. Not a drachma left. Broke than an umbrella salesman during a drought. Squandered every shekel on the kind of women his father warned him about.

It was a dirty job to take. Slopping slop into a filthy trough. But that is the job the son took. Terrible hours and terrible odors, but starvation has a way of making you settle. As the pigs oinked, his stomach ached. Ached for a spoonful of the slop the hogs were inhaling. At the same time, his heart ached over something else. Over what he had said and where he had gone and what he had done. Over the mess he had made. Over his sin.

But that was the very moment when the lightbulb went on—the first sensible thought he had thought in forever. “I could go home . . .” Well, not “home.” The son knew better than that. He burned that bridge when he spit in his father’s face and left the family for girls and goblets of wine. He was too dirty to be called a son. His sandal-less feet were filthy, but not nearly as filthy as his conscience. But maybe a dirty guy like him could work in the dirty fields, getting his hands and feet dirty with a hard day’s work for a hard day’s pay. That was the plan. From dirty to duty.

What the son never expected was that by the end of the day, he would go from dirty to dancing.

But dance he did. The dance steps started on the road that led home. His father saw him from a distance (was he watching and waiting that whole time?) and flew off the back porch, not a dirty look to be seen in his eyes. Before the son could say a word, the dance began, a slow dance of forgiveness. Wrapping his arms around the boy’s dirty neck, the father swayed back and forth, rocking him like a child, kissing him on every silent beat.

Before the boy knew it, the actual music was playing, a beat so infectious that even Pharisees would have tapped their toes. His father practically dragged him out to the dance floor, spinning him so fast the son’s laundry-fresh robe whirled up to his knees. Roaring with laughter, his father wrapped an arm around his shoulders and started a father-son kick line, showing off the boy’s washed feet and new sandals. Smiling like God on the

seventh day, the father offered his son a fat filet mignon, cooked with just the right amount of pink in the middle. Dad watched him eat, his face shining on him and beaming grace to him. But before the boy could finish his last bite, his father was on his feet again, singing and begging the son, “Come and dance!”

The boy’s brain could not comprehend the day. How, in a few hours, had he gone from dirty to dancing?

Have you ever heard that story? It might be the most famous tale Jesus ever told. “The parable of the prodigal son” is what some Christians call it. The gospel of Luke, one of the four biographies of Jesus in the Bible, records this story that has inspired a million sermons—the final part of Jesus’ trilogy on the joy of finding something that (or someone who) was lost.

But do you know why Jesus told that story? Luke tells us, “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ Then Jesus told them this parable . . . ” (15:1-3). Ah, the tax collectors and “sinners,” the notoriously dirty people from around town. Who would welcome filthy folks like them? Who would break bread with the morally broken? Who in their right mind would dare to dine with the dirtiest sinners on God’s green earth?

According to Jesus, God would. If God would come walking into town, he would find the dirtiest people and tell them a story about a dirty kid who ended up dancing. I write that with absolute certainty because two thousand years ago, Jesus, who claimed to be God in human flesh, did come walking into town and did that very thing, told that very story.

That is why I am so happy you are reading this book. Because pornography has made lots of us feel dirty. Men and women. Adults and children. Church-leading pastors and churchgoing people. Our hearts feel like that son’s feet: covered in the moral slop that a good night’s sleep can’t quite wash off.

Like the young woman who couldn't sleep because of porn. The guilt and the shame kept her up, gnawing at her soul. Her email arrived in my inbox at 3:09 A.M., a desperate cry for help. The devil, who hours earlier excused her potential sin, now was accusing her for agreeing with him. He would not let her believe she was anything but dirty, instead of one of the daughters God delights in.

Or like the young man studying to be a pastor. Despite years and years of Christian education, he wasn't even sure if God loved him anymore. He wasn't sure if he could actually be forgiven after the countless times he had sinned in dirty ways. The young man had sung "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know" for decades of his life, except he didn't "know" it anymore. Theologically, he knew better, but his conscience couldn't be so easily convinced. He felt too dirty to be loved by a holy God.

Or like the quiet couple on my counseling couch. He is brave enough to confess a struggle he never mentioned during all those years of dating. I watch her expression as he tells her. She, by God's grace, is forgiving like her Father in heaven, but the pain is real. No doubt she will wonder what she did wrong, why he turned to other girls, how much weight she should lose, why she isn't enough to satisfy him, and a thousand other irrational questions that come when porn dirties the intimacy between a man and his wife.

Or like the every-Sunday church attender who whispers to me after my porn presentation, "It's been 30 years." I see the hopelessness in his eyes as he questions whether his addiction will last 30 more.

Or like the woman who struggles with masturbation and has no clue to whom she should confide her dirty secret. Her pastor? Her Bible study friends? Are women allowed to confess that? Is anyone?

Or like the mom who finds the search history her kid hasn't yet learned how to erase. Appalled at the dirty words her "inno-

cent” baby has learned to type, she is paralyzed by the question, “But isn’t she too young?”

Or like me. For too long, porn conquered me. Despite all the church services I attended, the passages I memorized, and the prayers I prayed, I felt as dirty as the son in Jesus’ story. My online wild living, though tame by today’s standards of porn, was enough to make me question the authenticity of my faith. Could God save a wretched repeat offender like me?

Stories like these are not the outliers of a depraved culture. Unfortunately, they are the norm. Statistically, porn affects every pew. If you haven’t struggled with online pornography and masturbation, the odds are that someone in your pew at church has. Jesus-loving, God-fearing, church-attending people that you love struggle with porn. Read that last sentence again and again until you believe it (it’s okay, I can wait). Your loved ones struggle. Most of them just haven’t told you yet.

No matter who you are—a porn addict, a concerned father, a frustrated wife, a girl whose boyfriend just confessed, a girl who just confessed to her boyfriend, a pastor who wants to help, a pastor who needs help, whoever—I am honored that you picked up this book. Thank you for being courageous enough to explore this taboo topic. God’s church needs more people like you, people who care enough to reach out for help or to reach out to help others.

I’m not sure how your brain works, but my type-A wiring loves organization. I love knowing where we are going and when. So here are my four goals for our time together in the pages ahead:

First, I want to convince you that porn is bad. Really bad. Evil. Wicked. Dirty. Deadly. I want to show you that porn wants to kill nearly everything you love, proving there is no such thing as a consequence-free click.

Second, I want to show you that Jesus is good. Really good. Thrilling. Gracious. Forgiving. Unbelievably delighted in you. I want to prove that the Bible was written, in large part, about sexual sinners and for sexual sinners. I want you to dance as you feel the infectious beat of God's eternity-shaking grace.

Third, I want to compel you to make porn a public matter. Open. Honest. Vulnerable. Communal. Discussable. (This might be the point where you stop reading and tell yourself that another prayer might be all you need to fix a porn addiction. . . .) I want to use Scripture, my own story, and my experience in leading an anti-pornography ministry to show you that confessing to other people, and not just God, is one of the most powerful ways to conquer porn.

Finally, I want to give you a practical plan to go to war against porn. Doable. Workable. Clear. Effective. I want to share the tips that help God's kids stay out of the cesspools of porn. Some of those tips will challenge you, but all of them can help you overcome the sin that Jesus conquered on the cross.

So if you're ready for the journey, let's get you and those you love from dirty to dancing!

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CHAPTER

DIRTY Looks

As I stand in the gas station mini-mart, I can't help but notice the marketing. My running partner, Nate, made it into the bathroom first, so I decide to stretch my quads and lust after the gas station donuts while I wait.¹ But then I notice the three letters wrapped around the stand-up cooler—XXX. Apparently, there is a new sports drink on the market, and the advertising gurus thought of this attention-getting name. After all, what is the first thing that comes to your mind when you think of electrolytes? Porn, right? Okay, maybe not . . .

But what gets my attention more than the branding is the tagline. It reads, "Because a little XXX never hurt anyone." Oh, really?

In a way, I wish that were true. I wish my past porn habits never hurt my wife. I wish I never had to hear the "I'll never be pretty enough" line from another brokenhearted wife from our church who just found out about her husband's problem. I wish I never met the kids who started looking in grade school and couldn't stop looking as their rewired brains craved more and more. I wish no one I knew ever went to jail because legal porn couldn't satisfy them anymore. I wish sexting wasn't an issue at my church, driven by the sex-pectations of teenagers raised

¹ Lust, according to my online dictionary, is "a passionate desire for something," which accurately describes the way I feel about donuts.

on porn. I wish porn never ended a man's ministry and left his church confused and his community shaking their heads. I wish the clever marketers were right. I wish a little porn never hurt anyone.

But they are not right. They are as far from right as left itself. Porn hurts everyone. Porn kills. Porn dirties the white-robed blessings our Father longs to give to his children.

This chapter is going to sting a bit, but I need you to read it. I need you to know what happens every time you click. I need you to know what will happen if you don't do something to protect your kids from their first click. I need you to know what we will lose if porn wins. Only then will we have the passion to go to war against porn.

Porn Dirties _____.

Porn dirties minds. Smartphones scare me. Have you noticed in recent years how strong our thumbs are getting and how pathetic our eye contact has become? Our phones have us on a digital leash, demanding our attention and refusing to be ignored for more than a few minutes.

Why is that? What "changed" our minds? Answer: chemicals. God wired our brain with powerful chemicals, which, if not cautiously used, will turn us into itching, sweating, craving, gotta-get-a-hit addicts. When it comes to internet-connected devices, the unending variety and constant stimulation is a 24/7 opportunity to release more pleasure-inducing chemicals into our brains.

Which makes porn the perfect drug. The sexually exciting, potentially dangerous, and unending variety of porn releases ungodly amounts of dopamine (the pleasure chemical) into our brains. Combine porn with masturbation and, neurologists will tell you, the brain experiences dopamine levels similar to users

of crack cocaine. The brain screams, “Woohoo! That felt incredible! Let’s do that again! Listen up, synapses! Shout, ‘More of that!’ on the count of three.” Users start to crave that “high” like any addict with needle marks in her arms. And saying no becomes a complicated struggle, a detox that requires massive willpower and the selfless help of God, family, and friends.

Add the chemical oxytocin to the mix. Oxytocin is nicknamed the “cuddle hormone,” the same chemical which floods the minds of mothers as they breast-feed, lovers after a night of intimacy, and porn users after another hit. Ever wonder why the big stud in the action movies gets all sappy and poetic after sleeping with the leading lady? Oxytocin! The mind is cuddling with—holding on to—the person who caused the dopamine rush. Or the pixels. Unable to tell the difference, the brain craves porn more and more with every click. It pushes our bodies to find the source of that intense pleasure we felt two nights ago. What might not cross the mind of the others in the business meeting now crosses yours. Oxytocin made it that way.

Then mix in the chemical epinephrine. Epinephrine, among other things, burns images into our minds like pictures saved on a hard drive. Our bodies want to remember vividly what caused that dopamine/oxytocin rush, so they take “snapshots” of those moments.

A podcast host in her late 20s recently recounted her experience as a six-year-old in a convenience store, recalling details of the first porn she ever held in her hands. A seminary professor once told me about the day when someone from the community pranked him, planting a dirty magazine in his mailbox. “Mike,” he said (in his deep, professorial voice), “I can still remember the picture.”

That’s epinephrine. Sadly, that means lust isn’t waiting until you choose to Google something sexual or gawk at the cute runner in your neighborhood. No, your mind will automatically supply the images, begging you, like a kid in the toy aisle,

“Can we look at this again? Can we do this again? Can we feel what we felt the other day?”

Get the point? Porn dirties your mind. It rewires your brain so that fleeing from sexual immorality means running into a fierce headwind, feeling like there’s a magnet in your mind pulling you back into porn. Saying “No!” gets harder with every click. The compulsive behavior is so intense that even non-Christian sources are warning us about the “perfect drug” called porn. When the world agrees with the church, you know something evil is at work. . . .

I need you to remember all of this brain stuff if someone you love is struggling with porn. I know their porn use hurts you. You want your son, your wife, your boyfriend to just quit cold turkey. You want the tears you shed to be enough for them to shut off porn forever like a light switch. You want them to take their sin seriously and to love you not with apologies but with actions. I get it. And I agree with you. God does too. Jesus’ goal is exactly that—for them to never look at porn again.

But a dirty mind cannot be cleaned up with a quick swipe of an emotional conversation. Their brain needs to be rewired, retaught, reprogrammed. They need to go through a detox of sorts, one that will require God’s love and your patience. Not only is their sinful nature constantly craving more porn, their addicted brains are too. So pray passionately for the Holy Spirit to help you “be patient, bearing with one another in love” (Ephesians 4:2). They can change, but it will not be easy. They will need your help, your grace, and not more guilt.

On the other hand, if you yourself are struggling, take heart! The same brain you trained to crave porn can be retrained. Your old brain can learn new tricks. Neurologists call this neuroplasticity, meaning our brains are like moldable plastic, not unchangeable stone. Rewiring your brain will be agonizing at first—you will jitter like a drug addict in rehab—but week by week, God will renew and rewire your mind. Every day that you

reject and resist porn is a day your brain gets better. Many former addicts notice a massive change after the 90-day threshold, when saying no to porn becomes a simple habit instead of a grueling struggle. I pray that one day you will look back and wonder, “Why was porn so hard to resist?”

True, porn dirties your mind. But God is able to clean it up.

Porn dirties kids. For years, I have promised parents that I would write a book entitled *Judgment Day Parenting*. The premise? You pray every day for Jesus to return before your daughter hits puberty!² As a dad with two daughters whom I adore, I am more terrified than a cat at a dog park of the days when they grow up.

Which is why I should not have read the book *American Girls*. Author Nancy Jo Sales interviewed hundreds of teenage girls in America, chronicling their experiences in our digital age. *Mortified* would be too weak of a word to describe how I felt as I read Sales’ findings, especially with porn. Porn is reaching and teaching the little girls that we love so much.

Combine fifth graders with the internet in their pockets, naive parents who are delaying the “talk” until high school, and curious classmates who are willing to Google anything, and—voila!—porn is the newest sex education class. Porn teaches third graders what sex “should” look like, namely, aggressive, easy, simple, demeaning. Porn teaches sixth graders how real “men” are supposed to act in bed, namely, like studs who can drive a woman wild with a single, sexy look. Porn teaches freshmen girls what boys want, namely, 24/7 sex and little else.

As a result, porn dirties our kids. John Chirban of Harvard Medical School laments, “With porn, you’re not looking at the meaning and value of a whole human being. Girls take away from it the message that their most worthy attribute is their

² Few points in my presentations get as much applause, especially from dads with daughters.