

# Sex and Cyberspace



By *Melissa Partain*

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Imagine coming home early, expecting to find an empty house. You walk into a room and your loved one hastily jumps up from the computer, blocking the monitor. A litany of rapid-fire questions ensues: “Why are you home so early? Why didn’t you knock? Why are you looking at me like that?” You don’t hear any of the questions because you saw what was on the computer screen and you intuitively know it will impact your lives significantly. You’ve caught your loved one viewing pornography on the Internet. Dozens of thoughts flood your head. How long has this been going on? How can this be happening to me? What will happen to our relationship now?

Does this sound like an everyday experience? Probably not. But the truth is that cybersex is a rapidly increasing problem within Western society.<sup>1</sup> The Internet isn’t even 20

years old, but in this brief amount of time it has become a prevalent source of sexually explicit material for a significant portion of our population. Sexual activity on the Internet is growing at such an exponential rate that researchers are scrambling to maintain current data.<sup>2</sup>

The relative accessibility and anonymity the Internet makes online sexual activity appear both alluring and safe. More homes are now equipped with Internet access and current safeguards do not always sufficiently protect against the ever-present plethora of sexually explicit material just a click away. People who would never consider walking into an adult bookstore or entering into an adulterous relationship can now act out sexually in the privacy of their own homes or offices. While the Internet presents itself as harmless, the effects of cybersex activity are as detrimental to relationships with both man and God as more classically defined forms of adultery, fornication, and lust.

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<sup>1</sup> Cybersex is defined by Cooper, Delmonico, and Burg as “The pursuit of sexual interests on the internet.” In A. Cooper, D. L. Delmonico, and R. Burg, “Cybersex Users, Abusers, and Compulsives: New Findings and Implications,” *Cybersex: The Dark Side of the Force* (Philadelphia: Brunner Routledge, 2000), page 6. For the purpose of this article, cybersex specifically relates to pornography and sexual chat rooms.

## **Cybersex in the Christian Community**

Statistics show that cybersex is a

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<sup>2</sup> Research in this field has existed since the early 1990’s, yet most studies focus on demographics and trends rather than solving the problems that arise in the lives of individuals.

significant problem within the Christian community, but it is one that is not openly discussed.<sup>3</sup> Research suggests that despite a lack of conversation on this topic, we all know individuals, including women, who currently wrestle with this sin.<sup>4</sup>

Cybersexuality is inherently a private sin, coupled with enormous amounts of shame. On the surface, it appears to be worse than many other sinful behavior patterns. The way to become effective with those who struggle with this problem is to discuss the issue openly, and in doing so, to show cybersexual activity to be something that stems from the same motivations that sit at the core of the hearts of each and every one of us. Coupled with this, we must come to a deep understanding that the only way to change motivations is through the power of the Holy Spirit. We are incapable in and of ourselves to do anything but sin.

### ***What Does Cybersexuality Look Like?***

As with any sin, a look at cybersexual behavior involves more than just looking at the person involved in it. It means looking at the impact on family and friends as well. Consider a person who is engaged in cybersexual activity. As he spends increasing amounts of time in front of a computer, loved ones notice his absence. He stays up later at night or creates intricate excuses for bowing out of various activities in order to gain computer time. He stays at work later in order to have private computer access away from home. When loved ones question what he is doing with his time, or express that they miss him, he becomes defensive and abrupt with his responses. He is

afraid of being caught, and at the same time, ashamed of what he is doing.

Intimacy with his spouse decreases, partly because he has found another outlet for his sexual desires. This decrease is also due to a noticeable change in his emotional and conversational intimacy with his wife. He no longer talks about the details of his day or his personal struggles. Instead, he is distant and blames her for small irritations that never bothered him before. He is aware that what he is doing in private is wrong. He thinks the people who surround him are too “good” to understand his struggle. His irritable interactions and defensive anger set a hedge between him and others while making them less “good” in his own eyes. Frustration gives him an excuse to go back to the computer for another escape.

A father’s cybersexual activity affects the entire family. If he uses the family computer, sexually explicit sites pop up when another family member is on line. Children in the household suspect something is wrong long before the situation is addressed. They feel ashamed of their father’s activities and suspicious of his intentions with friends. If they are old enough, they spend less time at home and stop inviting friends to visit. Conversations with their father become infrequent and carry less depth. To a degree, they feel as though they do not even know him anymore.

Work habits of someone involved in cybersexual activity degenerate over time as the person spends more and more time accessing pornography or chat rooms while at home and on the job. Late nights spent in front of the computer make for less coherent waking hours. The office computer becomes a temptation instead of a business tool. Unfortunately, the issue goes unaddressed until he is caught in the act of cybersexual activity and then loses his job or is put on probation.

The person involved in cybersexual activity is trapped in an ever-deepening quandary. The longer he keeps his struggle a secret, the more the sin grips him, and the more difficult it becomes to walk away from those motivations and behaviors. At the same time, if he exposes his heart to loved ones, he

<sup>3</sup> One survey showed that 96% of 600 male respondents under the age of 20 masturbated regularly, many using pornographic materials in order to create arousal: Archibald D. Hart, *The Sexual Man*. (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1994). Another survey found that 33% of clergy respondents and 36% of laity had visited sexually explicit websites: C.J.Gardner, “Tangled in the Worst of the Web,” *Christianity Today*, 45(4) (2001), pages 42-49.

<sup>4</sup> Women who struggle with cybersexual activity often feel even more removed from ‘normal’ society than their male counterparts. The number of women engaged in cybersexual activity (predominantly chat rooms) is increasing significantly. Therefore, it should not be assumed that this is an exclusively male struggle. However, for simplicity, the pronoun “he” will be used throughout this article.

runs the risk of rejection, desertion, gossip, and judgment. The family, even when they are aware of his struggle, sidesteps the problem because of conversational awkwardness. They fear the denial, refusal to change, and the general shame of having outsiders discover their secret. When the problem finally surfaces, solutions often involve quick fixes. The sooner the issue is resolved, they think, the sooner they can pretend it never happened. But this solution is no solution at all. This cycle leaves the problem half resolved at best and robs the struggling person of the encouragement and support he needs to avoid falling back into old patterns and motivations.

### ***Psychological Approaches and a Biblical Response***

The desire to avoid awkward confrontation, the fear of harsh judgment and abandonment, and the messy task of repentance and change have put the Christian community far behind the secular community in terms of theories and research regarding habitual cybersexual activity. Secular psychologists consider cybersexual activity to be a serious, destructive problem and recognize the need for professional intervention in habitual lifestyles.<sup>5</sup> If we as Christians desire to understand cybersexual sin, we must examine solutions offered by secular psychologists and then hold these up against what God offers.

#### **1. Impact of Childhood Abuse**

Several key points can be drawn out of current psychological research. Studies have noted that a high percentage of cybersexual addicts were abused (often sexually) as children.<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that childhood abuse guarantees cybersexual behavior, since

many who were sexually abused are not addicted to this activity; and conversely, many who are now deeply imbedded in these activities were not abused as children. While this research is not definitive, the discussion follows that sexual abuse (or any form of abuse) communicates a misunderstanding of the role and dimensions of sexuality and of the worth of the individual experiencing the abuse. A person who experienced sexual abuse as a child might consider sex to be a communicator of power or dominance rather than love. The abused person, it is argued, often develops gross misunderstanding of the nature of healthy relationships. At times, he even feels that he deserves the abuse.

While the Bible does not teach that the sins of others are to blame for our own sins, it does teach that we are vulnerable to the influence of the sins of others. We learn best by example, which is why God commands the Israelites to teach the Law and the history of Israel to each generation.<sup>7</sup> Jesus calls down harsh judgment upon those who influence children toward sin.<sup>8</sup> Abuse is wicked in God's eyes. It significantly affects the abused person, but at the same time, that person is still accountable for the reactions of his own heart. His life does not have to reflect the abuse he has experienced. Instead, it can be bound up in the perfect example and way provided by Christ. God is the ultimate giver of good gifts. He offers power to those who bestow truth in the midst of wickedness.

#### **2. Fear in Relationships**

A second factor often discussed in psychological circles is a person's fear of relationships. Vulnerability is necessary in intimate relationships, but the risk of being rejected or misunderstood seems daunting. Instead he finds himself exploring venues that allow for personal anonymity and control. In online chatrooms, he presents himself as a fictitious personality. He can cut off a relationship at any point by not replying to a message or not entering a specific chat room. Use of Internet pornography further removes a

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<sup>5</sup> Though outside of the scope of this article, it is worth mentioning that the western psychological community generally holds a view that cybersexual activity is acceptable in smaller doses. See Sandra Risa Leiblum, "Sex and the Net: Clinical Implications," *Journal of Sex Education and Therapy*, 22:1 (1997) 21-27; and A. Cooper, D.E. Putnam, L.A. Planchon, and S. C. Boies, "Online Sexual Compulsivity: Getting Tangled in the Net," *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity: The Journal of Treatment and Prevention*, 6:2 (1999), 79-104. The church must reject this perspective, since the activity itself misconstrues God's design for sex (a loving expression in a committed, monogamous, heterosexual relationship).

<sup>6</sup> A. Cooper, D.E. Putnam, L. A. Planchon, and S. C. Boies, *Ibid.*, 79-104.

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<sup>7</sup> Deut. 6:4-9

<sup>8</sup> Matt. 18:1-6

person from genuine relationships; while at the same time, it enables him to maintain shallow and deceitful levels of interpersonal communication online.

While fear of intimacy might be rooted in childhood abuse, psychologists often turn to the current relationships to evaluate that fear. It is not uncommon to find the home environment of a person engaged in cybersexual activity to be one that is stale and lacking in intimate communication. However, the question arises: which came first, the Internet use or the deterioration of personal intimacy? Most studies answer, yes to both of these questions.<sup>9</sup> A cycle develops in which a person turns to the Internet to gain a feeling of comfort or companionship that is not offered by a spouse or other significant person. This creates further emotional distance in the relationship. And so the cycle continues.

The issue of fear in relationships speaks to one reality in this world: relationships are hard. But secular psychology fails to step beyond fallible, inadequate people to the perfection found in God. We are guaranteed to fail at one point or another in all of our relationships, but we are also guaranteed that God will never fail in His relationship to us. As our heavenly Father, He loves us with an indestructible love. His love compels us to change. Christ removed all of our guilt and established us as alive and hidden in Him.<sup>10</sup> Humans will fail us, but that is not an adequate excuse to sin. We are Christ's and in Him we have the capacity to work through difficult situations and relationships in a redemptive manner.

### 3. Addiction and Obsession/Compulsion

Whether there is current relational strain or past abuse, a person engaged in cybersexual activity often concludes that he is no longer in control of his own actions. Psychological

theorists suggest two main explanations for this: addiction<sup>11</sup> or obsession/compulsion.<sup>12</sup> Addiction models describe a cycle that begins with a "high" achieved during the addicting activity, coming off of the high, guilt, depression, and re-engagement in the activity as an escape from the depression that generally follows. Cooper defines the pattern of online sexual addiction in his research conducted in 1998: "[Signs of online sexual addiction] include denial; unsuccessful repeated efforts to discontinue the activity; excessive amounts of time dedicated to the activity; negative impact of the behavior on social, occupational, and recreation functioning; and repetition of the behavior despite adverse consequences."<sup>13</sup> Treatments for this model generally focus on group therapy programs such as Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous.<sup>14</sup>

Arguments for treatment in the obsession/compulsion model follow the thinking that excessive cybersexual activity is irresistible. A force beyond the person's control drives him to engage in this activity. When a person is not engaged in the activity, he obsesses over it, and plans what he might do the next time he goes on-line. Treatment for obsessive-compulsive

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<sup>11</sup> J. P. Schneider, "Effects of Cybersex Addiction on the Family: Results of a Survey," *Cybersex: The Dark Side of the Force* (Philadelphia: Brunner Routledge, 2000), 31-58; and K. Young, E. Griffin-Shelley, A. Cooper, J. O'Mara, J. Buchanan, "Online infidelity: A New Dimension in Couple Relationships with Implications for Evaluation and Treatment," *Cybersex: The Dark Side of the Force* (Philadelphia: Brunner Routledge, 2000), 59-74.

<sup>12</sup> American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th Ed. (Washington, D.C.: APA, 1994). APA defines obsession as "recurrent and persistent thoughts, impulses, or images that are experienced, at some time during the disturbance, as intrusive and inappropriate and that cause marked anxiety or distress;" these obsessions are difficult to control. Compulsions are responses to these thoughts that often involve acting out a ritual in hope of dispelling the obsessions. For those caught up in cybersex, the obsession would be with the images, thoughts, or impulses experienced on the Internet and the compulsion would then be to engage in these images with hope that the action would temper the obsessive thoughts.

<sup>13</sup> A. Cooper. "Sexuality and the Internet: Surfing into the New Millennium." *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 1(2) (1998), 181.

<sup>14</sup> Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (SLAA): PO Box 650010; West Newton, MA 02165. Telephone: (617) 332-1845. Email: slaafws@aol.com. Website: www.slaahouston.org

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<sup>9</sup> J. P. Schneider, "Effects of Cybersex Addiction on the Family: Results of a Survey," *Cybersex: The Dark Side of the Force* (Philadelphia: Brunner Routledge, 2000), 31-58; and K. Young, E. Griffin-Shelley, A. Cooper, J. O'Mara, J. Buchanan, "Online infidelity: A New Dimension in Couple Relationships with Implications for Evaluation and Treatment," *Cybersex: The Dark Side of the Force* (Philadelphia: Brunner Routledge, 2000), 59-74.

<sup>10</sup> Col. 2:6-15

behaviors often includes anti-depressants in combination with therapy.

The addiction and obsession/compulsion models of cybersexual behavior label what a person does and experiences. This, in turn, gives it a measure of acceptance. A cybersexually active person often does not want to continue in his current pattern, but at the same time, his desires and motivations appear to be uncontrollable. This sense of powerlessness may aid in the belief that cybersexuality is not something we are responsible for before God and others. The truth regarding this misconception is two-fold. First, a person is accountable for his thoughts and actions, even the ones that initially appear to be unmanageable. A sinful life cannot be attributed to outside sources. At the same time, a person can change these thoughts and actions when he turns and finds help in

heart or to offer the hope found in Christ.

### ***Barriers to Biblical Change in the Christian Community***

Before we, as Christians, can assist the person struggling with cybersexual sin, we must first examine the condition of our own hearts. What lies do we tell ourselves when we face this issue in our community? What barriers stand in the way of tackling the problem wisely? What blocks the reflection of Christ in our own lives?

Perhaps the biggest barrier when faced with the cybersex issue is the tendency to think: "My sin is not as bad as your sin." We usually consider some forms of sin as more perverted or despicable than others, particularly when certain sins are not commonly discussed in the church. Members of the Christian community often shun others

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## Theories regarding addiction and obsession/compulsion do not reach our souls.

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altering his motivations through belief in God, His Word, and His people.

Theories regarding addiction and obsession/compulsion do not reach our souls. Only God is capable of doing this. Our sin runs deeper than life situations, chemistry, patterns of behavior, and experiences. The answer that satisfies goes deeper than medication or counseling regarding traumatic childhood experiences. These methods only lead to surface change and, at best, generate more socially acceptable, self-absorbed, ways of sinning. But God looks deeper than outward change. He desires changed hearts. Cybersexual activity itself is not the fundamental problem. The fundamental problem is that the cybersexual addict turns away from God and follows the idols that dwell in his own heart. God sees this. As His children, we learn to see this by the light of His Word and we learn to change.

The psychological community offers inadequate explanations. Ultimately, they distort the very problem they describe because they fail to examine the motivations of the

who have shared honestly about their struggles with sexual sin. We need to consider the motives behind this all-too-common occurrence.

We weigh our sins against the sins of others. We think, "When placed next to the disgusting, heinous sin of cybersex, my little problem with gossip or arrogance is no big deal." But that's not what the Bible says.<sup>15</sup> The understated sins of haughtiness and gossip are just as loathsome in God's eyes as sexual sins. According to the Word of God, all sin is infinitely wicked. When we contextualize our thoughts and actions in reference to Scripture, we find that no one, not even ourselves, is righteous. We also find that forgiveness and restoration is offered abundantly to all those who seek after God.

We are all sinners. That doesn't make it

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<sup>15</sup> See Col. 3:5-8. 1 Cor. 6:18 does speak of sexual sin as carrying a different weight than other sins. This conversation is outside of the scope of this article, however an excellent treatment of that passage can be found in Hodge, Charles. *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*. London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1958.

easier to talk about sex; it's still a rather private subject. Even so, as brothers and sisters in Christ, we aren't called to harsh attacks or intentional ignorance. We are called to give honest and vulnerable encouragement and gentle confrontation in the name of Christ.<sup>16</sup> Our words and deeds should be motivated by love for God and His people, not fear and timidity.

A second barrier in our Christian response to cybersexuality is our claim: "It's not my responsibility." But this response is wrong. Friends and family do have responsibility in handling a family member's cybersexual sin. As Christians, we are accountable for our responses. Do our reactions reflect judgmental anger and disgust, or do we view ourselves as fellow sinners and despise our own sin as well? Do people see us as approachable, or do we have a reputation of being quick to speak and slow to listen? Do we recognize our own depravity before God, or do we consider ourselves better than others? Do we recognize that the Spirit uses sinful people like us to encourage fellow sinners who struggle with the same wicked motivations that drive us?

The truth is that we can understand a person who is struggling with cybersexual activity because we are also products of Adam's fall. But will our energy be spent compounding the sin with gossip, judgment, and slander or will we, recognizing our own forgiveness, walk humbly beside this person with honesty and gentleness? God calls marriages, as well as friendships, to be redemptive, seeking the best for each other and loving each other with a love that encourages movement toward Christ.<sup>17</sup>

What is the biblical response to sin? How do we engage each other in biblical love? According to Colossians 3:1-17, we have been made new in Christ and therefore should consider ourselves dead to sin, forgiving others just as we have been forgiven by God. Our attitude toward people gripped by sin cannot be defined by harsh judgment, anger and

slander. Instead, it needs to flow out of recognition that the motivations that drive them are the same motivations that drive us. We are all sinners who have been saved solely by the grace of God. When we look deeply at our own lives and the desires that drive them, we can look more compassionately at the lives of fellow Christians.

Members of the Christian community—you and me, all of us—are called to compassion, patience, and humility in our dealing with those who grapple with cybersexuality. God has forgiven each of us and we must forgive those who approach us in repentance as well. God advocates a gentleness motivated by love. This gentleness and love flow from God. It is guided by admonition and encouragement through prayer and the Word of God.

Our goal is to communicate that same saving grace to others. Such grace cannot be communicated by just addressing the surface problem of cybersexuality. While such activity is sinful, it is driven by motivations that are false and flow out of a heart that is not bent toward God. These motivations need to be held up against the lens of Scripture so we can first realize how deeply our sin pervades, and second, how dependent we are on Christ's forgiveness.

In all of our conversation, we should remember that Colossians 3 calls us to emulate the peace of Christ. This is not the sort of peace that parades as placation and laziness. It is active peace, seeking holiness in ourselves and each other. It is peace that is driven by our desire for God and a love of His law. Above all, it is a peace that recognizes our helplessness to change outside of the grace given by God.

### ***Lies that Lead to Cybersexual Sin***

What about the individual involved in cybersexual activity? How does he justify his actions? What excuses does he give? What lies does he tell himself and others?

The individual person involved in cybersexual sin weaves a complex web of lies in order to explain his behavior and justify his sin. As we examine these lies through the lens of Scripture, the inadequacy of these justifications becomes clear.

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<sup>16</sup> See Eph. 5:3-13

<sup>17</sup> See Ephesians 5:22-33 for an excellent description of a redemptively-minded marriage.

## 1. "I'm not hurting anyone."

A commonly held lie of a person engaged in cybersexual activity is that his behavior is not destructive and that he is the only one affected by it. But sin does not work that way. Regularly exposing oneself to sexually explicit images affects how a person views sex, relationships, and people. This inevitably impacts loved ones.

The lie claims that this sin does not hurt anyone. To see through this lie, someone must confront the person with the fact that he has hurt others with his lies and secrecy, his failure to be present, his misuse of sex, his anger, and many other behaviors. At some level, that truth already exists within his conscience. His secrecy gives him away. Loved ones can confront him about his sin and speak honestly (as well as gently) about their concern for him and point out the impact his behavior has on their lives.

At the same time, there must be willingness to bring the person to an understanding that while sin impacts innumerable people, Jesus Christ offers forgiveness through His blood. Furthermore, as the person walks away from the belief that cybersexual activity is a "safe" sin, he can desire to have a positive impact on people, perhaps by helping others who struggle with the same problem. As Christians, we are ambassadors of Christ, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, called to demonstrate the Gospel, which is grace to sinners.

Encouraging a person who desires to expose the lie of "safe" sin requires accountability on the part of the encouragers. It requires commitment for prayer and acknowledgment of visible change when it occurs. Accountability can also be shown in reminders from the Word that we, being children of God, have refuge through Christ in the midst of a sinful world. This does not mean that we will be spared from feeling the effects of sin or from sinning against God and each other. It does mean that we turn daily from sin and serve the living God.

## 2. "I am in control."

Cybersexual activity can rise out of a desire to be in total control over one's own life. Real relationships can be difficult. Virtual and

fantasy relationships are easy—and easy to control. In day-to-day life, this drive for control manifests itself in increasing frustration with real situations and real people who cannot be controlled. On the computer, the person can regulate relationships by choosing specific sites, and then controlling the level of communication, frequency of interaction, duration of visit, and chosen topics.

Real people do not behave like people in the Internet fantasy world. Communication lines in everyday life dwindle as he builds more and more barriers that enable him to control his own life. Friends and family members notice irritation or anger developing more frequently in a person engaged in cybersexual activity.

The desire for control flies against what God intends for us. To put it bluntly, we are not, and never will be, in ultimate control of our lives. Someone engaged in cybersexual activity believes a lie when he believes he is in control. He creates the illusion of pseudo-relationships. These relationships inevitably fall to pieces through being discovered, or through the internal turmoil he experiences in wrestling with his conscience. The roots of pseudo-control are buried in a lack of faith in God and His perfect intentions for His people. When a person is angry or bitter because a situation did not go the desired way, he believes that he knows better than God. However, the Bible provides thousands of years of proof that this is not the case. We serve a God whose perfect plan does not fail. He promises that His children will one day be free from sin in the new heaven and new earth. His will directs to that end in every moment of every day.

How does a person move from the desire to control his own life toward the joyous and trusting control of God? Christians have struggled with this question for centuries. It begins with an acknowledgement that control is not ours to be had in the first place. It follows with recognition that we are indwelt with the Spirit of God, who was given to us as a guide. In daily life, it means moving toward people and being vulnerable. It means being more open about personal struggles, caring for others, and learning to share pain and joy with

other people. It means a shift in perspective by seeing this world as only a taste of what is to come.

Learning to rest in the truth that God is perfectly in control is not an overnight process. It requires a regular, conscious effort of walking away from the computer and walking to the wise counsel of friends, family, pastor, or counselor, and Scripture. When a person begins to feel out of control, the opportunity exists for either temptation or grace. The instinct may be to turn on the computer, but another option is to step back from the situation and seek God in prayer.

As family members, friends, and fellow believers, we are called to minister to those who crave control. Such a broad field of ministry might appear daunting, but everyday interactions, over a period of time, can break down seemingly impossible tasks. Do we regularly interact with people we know who struggle with cybersex? Do we ask them how

intimacy means avoiding rejection, abandonment, or lack of empathy. A computer screen filled with pornographic images appears harmless and non-threatening against the wounds we face daily when we open ourselves to other individuals.

Pseudo-intimacy interferes with honest relationships. We are not created to live in isolation. We are created to be relational beings. Failure to relate to each other in godly ways will have significant effects. It is true that we will hurt and be hurt by each other as we learn what it means to be servants. It is also true that failure to reach out to each other means depriving ourselves of a necessary and abundant gift. One who seeks intimacy on the Internet neglects those around him, tears down valuable interpersonal relationships, and in the end is left with an empty shell—haunted by fantasy.

A person who wants to shelter himself from the pain involved in being genuine and

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they are doing and refuse to accept a trite “okay” as the response? Do we share our own struggles with the person and find common ground to walk on? Do we pray for them and encourage them by letting them know when we see God’s work in their lives? Do we confront them when we see them slipping into old patterns again? Do we interact with their families and encourage them? Do we also do these things when everything appears to be going well? A person who desires to be in control is often very capable of appearing quite well on the surface; it is only when we care enough to dig deeper that we find a fellow sinner, broken, and in need of encouragement.

### 3. “If I avoid relationships, I avoid pain.”

Human relationships are guaranteed to be painful at one point or another because we are all fallen creatures interacting with other fallen creatures. Given this, one might believe the lie that life would be more enjoyable if relationships did not exist at all. Avoiding

open in relationships must come to see that there is no pain greater than that which Christ went through on our behalf. There is no safety greater than finding refuge in Christ. No love is as secure and unceasing as that of God. But even when we reject God, He does not abandon us.<sup>18</sup> Instead He pursues us with a love that forgives the repentant and offers life to those who are dead in sin. How can we, who deserve death and have been handed life, turn away from others who need the same redemption?

It is no easy process to see the world through the light of the Gospel. But as we come to understand how actively and perfectly God pursues us, fear of rejection is replaced with a desire to share the gracious gift given to us in Christ. A person entrenched in cybersexual activity must intentionally form relationships with other people, whether it be through accountability groups, or through

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<sup>18</sup> 2 Tim. 2:13

restoration of broken relationships in home or community. In our desire to help this person, we need to demonstrate the love of God by recognizing ways in which we have failed to encourage him. Do we make ourselves vulnerable to him as well? Do we ask for forgiveness and repent when we sin against him? Do we put ourselves in his shoes and acknowledge the struggle this person has? Do we see the Spirit working in this person to bring about a desire to serve others?

#### **4. “Immediate pleasure and escape is better than facing difficulties head on.”**

Instant gratification is a widespread characteristic of western culture. We are a fast food, fast life nation. Wanting convenience, and wanting it right now, can easily permeate our relationships. People become objects simply to be used for our pleasure and escape. A person engaged in cybersexual activity is motivated by a desire for immediate release of tension and instant escape from the pressures of the world. Seeking out pleasure requires increasing amounts of time. Tolerance for sexually explicit material builds up, and eventually the person seeks out greater amounts or more perverse forms.

Getting pleasure here and now initially seems like a gratifying path, but running to this escape culminates in destruction. If our strength for this life is placed in anything outside of Christ, it is a counterfeit strength. The solace found online leaves the person craving more; while at the same time, he feels shame because of his actions. Escape into a false reality goes against God’s commandment to love Him and one another. Cybersexual activity is a fleeting idol that destroys whoever pursues it.

The alternative to fantasy escapes is genuine faith in God and obedience to our Savior His strength carries us through all aspects of life. God is our refuge. He understands us perfectly, knows pain more deeply than any other, and desires and promises to do what is best for us. He loves us enough to mold us into people who are led by His Spirit to serve Him. But God does not promise escape from this world and its problems. His faithful promises provide

strength, through His Spirit, to survive these problems. All other methods of protecting ourselves from the world will fail.

As a person recognizes that the Internet cannot provide the escape and freedom from pressures of the world, he can learn to weigh these pressures against a different standard. As our thoughts and motivations are directed toward the eternal things, the temporal things are put into proper perspective.<sup>19</sup> This world becomes livable when our fundamental source of strength is not derived from it but from God Himself. From the perspective of eternity, every-day relationships are not impossible tasks. We do not need to hide from reality; God is directing reality for His holy purpose. The cybersexually active person can walk away from the computer and engage the world around him. Drawing strength from God through His Word as well as through fellow believers is possible. Trust in God and His promises shows through in one’s ability to speak honestly to others about one’s own struggles and fears. Seeing that others need helpful words and deeds reminds us to look to God as the one who is the infinitely wise controller of the course of the world.

A person struggling with cybersexual activity needs constant, but gentle, reminders of how empty and worthless his escape is when held up against the glory and grace of God and the beauty of truly intimate, loving relationships. This means we must share from the Word as well as from our own lives. It requires that we speak willingly and openly about our own fears and admit our own desire to be free from life’s difficulties. It also means assisting the person in removing the object of temptation so he is able to turn more easily to spiritually healthy methods of recuperating in the midst of life in a fallen world. This is not to say that every cybersexual user should toss the computer out the window. Rather, if the person genuinely desires change, he must consider having his online time monitored. He can install Internet providers that specialize in blocking sexually charged material.<sup>20</sup> He can also install a monitoring program that tracks

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<sup>19</sup> See 2 Cor. 4:18

web-surfing and sends the data to an accountability person.

**5. “My comfort and convenience are primary.”**

Life in this world means experiencing hectic, fast-paced days. It is common for a person who is regularly exposed to pornographic material to view people as objects of convenience rather than as human beings. Women in particular become a compilation of body parts rather than creatures made in God’s image. When my god becomes myself and my convenience, love for God and others quickly fades.

A person engaged in cybersexual activity must learn to put his personal needs under the authority of the Scriptures. Comfort and ease cannot replace service to God and to His people. Christ serves as our quintessential example as He lowered Himself beneath the comforts of heaven to live among the lowliest

the circumstances around with patience and wisdom? The path of seeking personal comfort leads to abandonment, loneliness, and finally, death. Desiring God’s purpose above all else is not an easy path, but it teaches us to view this world and this life as one that is not our own.

**6. “If I told others, they wouldn’t understand.”**

Many people do not share their cybersexual struggles with others because they fear harsh judgment. In the heat of the moment, it seems easier to continue on a destructive path than to make oneself vulnerable to rejection, shame, ridicule, pat answers, and the like. Unfortunately, the church has assisted, on some level, in feeding this lie since members often react in destructive ways to a person who is honestly seeking help.

Fear of rejection compounds the stigma that already exists in society. A person

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## Christ serves as our quintessential example as He lowered Himself beneath the comforts of heaven to live among the lowliest of men.

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of men. He cared for other people by exposing their hearts and offering the way of redemption. The Internet offers lies by implying that people are put here for our own pleasure. Reality says that we are put here for God’s glory. This does not mean that pleasure is outlawed, but the question is, in what things do we find pleasure?

Do we find pleasure in God’s law? In the beauty of His creation? In the wonderful intricacies of other people? In the midst of a heated situation, do we instinctively rail against the frustration and inconvenience of it all or do we pause to consider how we can turn

struggling with cybersexual activity knows that the church has a particular distaste for sexual sin. If he tells his spouse, she could refuse to forgive the sin and not work toward reopening lines of communication. She could even leave the relationship. Friends could abandon the relationship or gossip with others. A reputation, a way of life is at stake.

At one time or another, we all fear what others think about us. But when we find our identity in what they think, we elevate them above God. God’s standard should be our measuring stick: we are all sinners in desperate need of payment for our sins and reconciliation of our status as sons of God. For the person struggling with cybersexual behavior, this means being able to speak honestly about his struggles with the knowledge that he is not alone but is in a community of fellow sinners. It also means learning to be concerned with what God wants from us—repentance from sin, love for Him, and the desire to walk according to his standards, motivated by the

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<sup>20</sup> SafePlace and Integrity are examples of such blocking services. While products that block questionable Internet sites serve as a buffer against cybersexual activity, they can be problematic. They function by blocking sites that contain key words or phrases and thus preventing access to some Internet sites that do not contain sexually explicit material. For instance, a carpenter interested in researching paint strippers on the Internet would be prevented from accessing any site containing the word “stripper”.

Holy Spirit. Furthermore, it means recognizing that the only way these things can be accomplished is through Christ. We stand before God not by any merit of our own, but because our merit is in Christ, who advocates for us. Christ's death is capable of covering any sin, including fear of exposure and rejection.

### ***Closing comments***

Deadly lies, to be sure, are common to every human being. We are powerless to overcome them by our own strength, but can combat them through the strength provided by the Holy Spirit. That strength is manifested in the "putting off" of the lies and behaviors associated with sinful behavior-whether it be cybersexual in nature, or in judging those who have fallen into this sinful pattern. We "put on" the truth of our need for Christ's cleansing grace when we acknowledge our fallen state. This means valuing God and His creation beyond our own desire for escape or safety.

God created us to interact with one another. This interaction can be either destructive or redemptive, but it is never neutral.

These things cannot be learned outside of the context of a healthy body of believers. We must be willing to come along side our brothers and sisters who struggle with cybersexual activity.<sup>21</sup> We must not be afraid to speak honestly about the prevalence of this activity as well as its repercussions. We must combat the private nature of this sin by exposing the lies that motivate it, from the pulpit as well as in the context of quiet conversation. And we cannot leave ourselves condemned. For every look we take at our own hearts, we must turn to Christ and the grace provided in Him. He has bought us and we stand before God cleansed from our wickedness. Therefore, we can in turn communicate the same grace to other people. The Christian community must be willing to provide the voice to do this.

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<sup>21</sup> Christian groups designed specifically to assist people attempting to walk away from sexually deviant behavior do exist: e.g. Harvest Ministries in Philadelphia.