

Knowing God:

The Pathway to a Changed Life



INTRODUCTION

Can a person truly change? Can a person overcome patterns of behavior that are both destructive and sinful? And if so, from what source does one find the power and strength to change? What is the place of willpower and effort? What role does God play?

These questions are of critical importance for a number of reasons. Most of all, they concern every human being who has ever struggled with behavior that they would like to change, yet somehow couldn't seem to break its stranglehold. And all human beings find themselves at that place at some time in their lives — probably multiple times. So the question “can a person change?” is a deeply personal question. Can I change?

These questions are also important for those whose work involves helping people to experience life-change. Pastors believe that people can change. A great deal of the Bible, which they teach, presents standards for behavior which God has revealed as the way human beings were designed to live. Why would God tell us how we should live and exhort us to live that way if we are not able to change and live the way He has revealed to us? If we really shouldn't expect change, then God's revelation to us seems pointless, not to mention the hundreds of thousands of sermons preached that explain God's way to an abundant life.

In a similar fashion, Christian counselors (defined as professional counselors who are followers of Jesus) believe that what they bring to the counseling session can and will make a difference in the lives of their clients. They are committed to helping people experience life-change. Their clients are willing to pay them for an hour of their time in the belief that they will learn something that in the end will result in significant improvement in how they are living, whether its freedom from addiction, greater emotional stability, or any number of personal difficulties.

The truth is, on our own, often we are not able to figure it out. So we turn to a pastor or a professional counselor believing that they have answers that can make a difference. Though they may bring different resources to bear on the problems people face, they both seem to be convinced that real change is possible.

Why, then, do so many become frustrated with the lack of progress, with real life- change? Everyone knows of someone who has invested in many counseling sessions, and sat through hundreds of sermons and Bible Studies, yet the problems stubbornly remain. Perhaps you are one of those individuals. You've experienced the hope, and then the disappointment of investing time and money in the pursuit of life-transformation only to think, feel, behave much the same. Maybe there was a bit of progress along the way, but in the end, things ended up pretty much the same.

If they are honest, the pastor and counselor alike also wrestle with the lack of progress of the people they attempt to help. The pastor wonders why the power of sin in the lives of some of the members of his church that he knows personally (including his own life?) hasn't been broken. After preaching 12 weeks on forgiveness, he listens as a woman sits in his office and confesses her unwillingness or inability (which is it?) to forgive the man who deeply wounded her years ago. He finds himself telling her the same things he shared in his messages. Wasn't she listening? Did he miss a class in seminary that would have made him more effective in moving people toward change?

The counselor is frustrated with the lack of progress of her clients. Is she not using the right theoretical model? Is she sufficiently integrating her faith with her psychological understanding and training? Perhaps she isn't an effective practitioner, though she cares a great deal about people and their struggles. Why do some people come back week after week and seem to be stuck in the same place?

Both wonder about the lack of progress of the people they are truly committed to help. Is the problem the lack of right information? Is it not enough effort and spiritual discipline on the part of the people? Is the problem a wounded inner child, or simply a choice to sin? Is it codependency or stubbornness? Is the person primarily a victim or a sinner?

Perhaps in our world of quick and easy solutions for every problem, we have underestimated what we are up against when we speak of life-change. Perhaps we have misunderstood both the role that we play and the role that God plays in producing true, lasting change. Perhaps we have failed to take into account the monumental task involved when we speak of change — a fallen and weak human being transformed into the likeness of Jesus.

In the fictitious story that follows, a man with an addictive behavior seeks help — first from his pastor, and then from a professional counselor who is a Christian. While the addiction focuses on a specific behavior, the problem could be any pattern of behavior that stubbornly refuses to change.

The pastor and the counselor portrayed in the story are in no way meant to represent how all pastors and counselors would approach his problem. The account is not meant to diminish the good and important work both groups of professionals do in attempting to help people change. In describing their responses to Joe, they are presented in a somewhat stereotypical way. But like all stereotypes, there is a certain kernel of truth present. *(Author's note: Having been trained and having served in both professional capacities, as a seminary trained pastor and a licensed professional counselor, perhaps I can take liberty with taking aim at both. There is a bit of myself in both characters.)*

After Joe's visits with both his pastor and a counselor, he has an unusual encounter with someone who provides a very different perspective on life-change. Could it be that we have missed the most important thing God has revealed to us about change?

JOE'S STORY

He can't remember how it started — well, actually he can. When he was 14 years old, a friend at a sleepover pulled out a magazine that he had taken from his dad's room — a magazine with naked woman. He remembers both the shame and exhilaration that he felt that night. He knew he shouldn't be looking, but he did. He never told anyone, certainly not his parents.

Over the years, he had a few other opportunities to look, and he usually found that his curiosity, and later in his teen years, his desire were too great to resist. Now as a 30+ year-old husband and father, he is disgusted with his constant involvement in pornography. He struggles, repents, resists, makes promises to God, tries harder, has brief periods of reprieve, only to repeat the cycle. Nowadays, Joe is filled with a constant sense of failure and shame. "What is wrong with me?" he asks himself. He wonders about God's love and forgiveness. Is God even real? And if He is, does he really have a relationship with Him? Joe hates the whole business but seems powerless to overcome the temptation for very long. Recently, he has given up on the idea that he will get beyond this problem.

Somehow, he has successfully kept this sin a secret from everyone. No one suspects that behind the well-manicured and self-controlled exterior is a raging battle with lust, satisfied with a regular dose of internet images.

Finally, at the edge of despair, Joe feels compelled to take some action. He knows he needs to break the barrier of silence. He needs to humble himself, set aside his ego and pride, and seek some help. But where should he turn?

PROFESSIONAL CHRISTIAN COUNSELING

Joe finds the name of a well-respected Christian counselor and schedules an appointment. As he drives to the office on the appointed day, he is nervous and his stomach is churning. After a few awkward moments with the counselor when asked "How can I be of help to you?" he blurts out, as he blushes with shame, his story of over 15 years of bondage to a behavior he regards as sinful and destructive. The counselor listens intently, asks questions to clarify, and seems to have true compassion for his struggle. The hour goes by quickly, and Joe is encouraged to schedule another appointment, which he readily does with the receptionist.

As he drives away, Joe ponders the fact that he didn't get any "answers" from the counselor, but he did experience a profound sense of relief in being able to share a deep and dark secret that no one else knew. It would be too much to expect any quick fixes, he reasons.

As he sits at home that night, he feels he made a good choice in the counselor. He felt loved and valued despite his sin. As he thinks about it, he recalls that the counselor never actually used the word "sin" — he spoke of his "struggle" and his "addiction." He seemed to understand how hard this was, and that he really did not like his own behavior. At the close of the session, the counselor was encouraging, explaining that being honest was the first and most important step of many steps to follow in addressing these kinds of "issues." It began a "process" that would take some time. How long would this process be? What would the process involve? Well, the counselor was the one with the professional training, so he would just have to wait and to trust him. But for the first time, Joe felt a small tinge of hope. The cat was out of the bag, and

the potential to be rid of pornography was a possible scenario that he had not embraced in a very long time. Between the first and second session, he found himself drawn a few times to pornographic websites, but he knew there would be no quick fixes. He remained hopeful.

During the second session, the counselor explained to Joe that it was important to understand some of the underlying issues that were responsible for Joe's attraction to pornography and its power over him. He explained that all behavior is best understood as springing from dynamics operating deep within a person, even if one is unaware of them.

That began a rather extensive exploration of unresolved issues from his childhood and family of origin (he had those), self-esteem (he acknowledges he has always struggled with this), feelings of inadequacy (painful to admit, but true), etc. He finds himself recalling and talking about things he had not thought of for years. Joe is amazed at how well the counselor is able to draw out memories and feelings that are deep within, things that he has never revealed to others.

The counselor assures him that all of these things are important to bring out into the open because they are what fuels his addictive behavior. He explained that "...the will is bound by understanding." At the close of the session, the counselor states that Joe has worked hard in their time together, and that significant progress in self-awareness, which is the foundation for behavior change, has been made. Joe schedules another appointment before he leaves the office.

In the weeks that follow, the sessions continue to unveil more stuff from Joe's past. He does learn a great deal about himself. He understands how the addictive cycle began and how it is now reinforced. He understands the immediate "benefits" he receives from pornography and why he is drawn to it even when he knows it is wrong and hates how he feels in the end. He sees when he is most vulnerable and why he runs to it when he is stressed, anxious, angry, etc. He has learned a lot. And there has been some reduction in his looking at pornography as he has tried to turn to more helpful and constructive alternatives.

As the weeks go by, however, and he continues to give in to temptation, he becomes discouraged. It seems that despite his progress in understanding and his slight behavior change, the power of lust remains as strong as ever. He learned at the beginning of the counseling that addictions are difficult to break, and that this would be a process. But now he is unsure of whether or not any true progress is being made at all. He is filled with these thoughts as he sneaks into his den late at night when everyone is asleep and logs on to the internet. The next day he cancels his next appointment with the counselor.

PASTORAL COUNSELING

Joe picks up the phone and calls the church office. The pastor's assistant finds an opening and he is scheduled to meet with the pastor in a few days. In the days before the appointment, he thinks seriously about canceling. It was one thing to tell his story to a stranger that he would only see in the safe confines of the counselor's office. It is another thing to tell the pastor who will forever think about him differently. When he sees him from the platform, in the hallway, at the church picnic, he will know this terrible truth about him.

He wonders how the pastor will respond. He seems like a good guy, but he doesn't actually know him that well. What will he think? The Sunday before the appointment,

the message was on how God promises victory over sin. The verse that stuck in Joe's mind was that God would not allow one to be tempted beyond what one could handle. God always provides a way of escape. It was a very positive, encouraging and timely message. Joe decides to keep the appointment. It seems like it is now or never.

As their time together begins, they exchange quite a bit of small talk. Joe figures the pastor thinks he is there to talk about the building project or the short-term mission trip or some related question. He almost gets cold feet, but when there is five seconds of silence, Joe courageously dives into his story. He is surprised to find tears flowing as he details his long-term involvement in pornography.

As he unburdens himself, he notices that the pastor is very attentive. His few remarks along the way as the story unfolds communicate love and compassion. There is no sense of being condemned for his sin. Joe reaches the end of his tale, providing a description of his counseling experience. He concludes: "I really, really want to put this chapter of my life behind me. Your message on Sunday provided hope that perhaps God really can help me. I need a way of escape."

The pastor begins his response by telling him that this is not the first time he has heard this story from men in this church — he is not alone in his struggle. He does understand that Joe really does not want to behave this way — he really wants to change. And he honors him for his honesty and for seeking help. "You have done the right thing."

"As you know, God gave us his Word to help us face temptation and to have victory over the grip of sin in our lives." He reaches for his Bible and for the next thirty minutes or so, he shares passages that warn of the evils of sexual immorality. "God's will for you is your sanctification — that you abstain from sexual immorality. Paul wrote those words to the Thessalonian followers of Jesus."

"Do you believe that God will provide for you a way of escape, as I shared in my message last Sunday?"

"Yes, of course I do," replied Joe. "But I am not sure what that escape looks like. I have been doing this for so long. I don't know how to escape it."

The pastor responded by outlining a number of things that Joe needed to implement right away in order to escape the temptation and not give in to lust. First, he needed to find a way to cut off the source of the pornography. The Bible says to "flee immorality," not to stand before it and resist it. He pointed Joe to software for his computer that filters out pornographic websites. It also would provide an email report to someone else regarding his web activity on a daily basis.

The next thing his pastor shared concerned the "someone else" who would receive these reports. Joe needed to have accountability. When asked if there was some trusted friend that Joe could take into his confidence, Joe replied that there was no one he wanted to share this with. The pastor agreed to be that person for the short-term until someone else could be identified.

At the end of their hour together, the pastor challenged Joe to make a commitment to him and to God that he would do all in his effort to resist the sin. "There is the part you play. God will help you, but you must also make an effort — a strong effort. To the Hebrews, the Biblical writer asked if they "had yet resisted sin to the point of shedding blood." You need to get up every day, more determined than you have ever been that you will not give in. God will meet you at that place —

the place of determination and full commitment. God will be faithful to His promise to help you. Ask Him to help you as you begin and end your day, and all day long. God is not going to ask you to do something that you cannot do. Remember, you are the temple of the Holy Spirit. He is within you, and you do not want to continue to dishonor him.” They concluded their time with prayer.

On the drive home, Joe again felt some relief and some hope. It was great to not be battling this on his own. He thought about the software and knew that removing the availability would be a big help.

The pastor really hadn’t shared anything that he had not heard before, so he did wonder how this would be any different than a hundred other commitments and resolutions that he had made over the past years. Perhaps having someone else encouraging, praying and holding him accountable would make a difference.

That evening he installed the software on his computer before he retired for the night. As he lay in bed at night images from past excursions into the world of pornography came to his mind. He did all he could to drive them away. At least with the filter on the computer he could not get up and add to the images.

The next morning he began, as suggested by his pastor, with affirming his commitment and expressing to God and to himself his determination. He did this every day that week and did nothing to access pornography. There were, however, continued “failures” with what he regarded as the “library in his mind.” He’d have to talk to the pastor about that at a later time. He wasn’t sure what if anything could be done to get rid of those images. Lust continued to hold him in its grip.

A week after their initial meeting he received an email from his pastor, reminding him of his concern and assuring him of his prayers. He shared a few verses and suggested that he memorize them and meditate on them. “Transformation comes from the renewing of our minds. These verses will help renew your mind.”

After two weeks of “fleeing immorality” and “resisting sin” he wonders if the battle is always going to feel this way. It is a daily tug of war — and one still frequently lost as he “sees” the images stored in his mind. The temptation to return to the internet was great, but the accountability seemed to be working...until he remembered his old laptop stored in the hallway closet. It didn’t have the filter installed, and he had an old email account that was still active. A late evening of wrestling back and forth with the temptation ended when he sat in his den looking into the small screen of his laptop.

As he put his head on the pillow that night, Joe was filled with despair. Should he call the pastor in the morning and confess? But what could he say that he hadn’t already said? The “way of escape” hadn’t seemed to help. He must just be a weak person. Perhaps God had given up on him a long time ago. He tossed and turned as he sought the escape from torment he would find in sleep — which seemed to be the only place where he didn’t give in to temptation.

AN UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER

Joe was never certain whether the events that transpired later that night were a dream or a vision or just his imagination. Whatever the case, by some miracle, Joe found himself sitting in his living room with a man who identified himself as Paul, the apostle and writer of a great deal of the New Testament. Paul asked him why he appeared to be so distressed.

Now here was a real dilemma. Could he tell Paul? A counselor and a pastor were one thing, but Paul? This man had written most of the New Testament passages that dealt with life-change. And he had the impression this was a stern man. He recalled some words of Paul written to the church in Corinth about sexual immorality. Yet if anyone would know what he needed to do to break free of this sin, it would be Paul. So he took the risk and told him the source of his distress.

Much to his surprise, as Joe provides the details of his struggle, and the years of failure, Paul moves toward him, places his hand on his shoulder, and even begins to shed tears. When Joe finishes, Paul embraces Joe and tells him that he loves him. He assures him of God's love — that nothing can separate him from God's love. "You know that, don't you Joe?"

Before Joe can respond, Paul becomes animated and tells Joe that there is nothing about which he is more passionate than seeing Jesus Christ formed in a person. He is confident that when a person first comes to Christ, it is meant to be the commencement of a life-long work God will do to bring increasing maturity. It is as expected and as natural as a baby growing to adulthood.

"If I am to help you overcome this bondage in your life, I need to get to know you a bit, and to understand some important aspects of your life," Paul says. "Since we probably don't have a lot of time, I am going to get right to the most important things I need to know. I am going to phrase it a number of different ways so that you will have a clear understanding of what I am after. Is that okay?"

Joe answered in the affirmative.

"Tell me," Paul said, "what you do daily to feed your soul? What do you do every day that nourishes and grows your relationship with Jesus? What things do you do that help you grow in your knowledge of God, not knowledge about God, but knowledge of God, to know him personally and intimately? How would you describe how you consciously, intentionally, purposefully 'walk by the Spirit so that you will not fulfill the deeds of the flesh?' How is your inner man being renewed every day? In what manner do you put on the armor of God so that you are able to resist the evil one? I do hope that you recognize in those questions some of the words I wrote years ago about how a person can actually live a life that is being transformed."

Joe did indeed recognize most of them, but it was something to hear them come from Paul himself.

"So share with me," Paul continued, "how you are living in a way that engages regularly in the life of God and the power of His Spirit who lives within you — then I think I can help you figure out what you need to do to learn to break the power of sexual temptation in your life."

Joe replies: "Well, I go to church once or twice a week, most of the time. I try to have my devotions or quiet time every day, but honestly, probably 2-3 times a week is what I actually

do. Then I am involved in a men's Bible study group that meets for an hour Tuesday mornings. I know I should pray more, but I find it hard to get much consistent quiet and alone time to do so. I guess my Christian walk could use some improvement, if that's what you're after."

In the brief silence that followed, Paul seemed to be struggling to understand what Joe had just shared with him. After a few moments he asked, "Tell me about this thing you called devotions or, what was it, a quiet time?"

Joe explains to Paul that he tries to get a regular time alone with God, usually reading the Bible and praying. He believes that he should do it every day, but doesn't. On the days when he has devotions, he tries to spend 20-30 minutes doing so. Many days it's more like 5 minutes before he hurries out the door, late for work.

"Anything else?" asks Paul.

"No, that's about it," Joe answers.

Paul is silent in his thoughts for some time. In reality, he is incredulous. Finally he responds, "Joe, of course you can't overcome this sin! Of course you can't resist temptation. The only thing that surprises me is that you seem to be surprised that you have been caught in the snare of pornography, as if given the kind of relationship you have with Jesus, you should not be losing the battle."

"For starters, your use of the word 'devotions' is strange. I have never heard the word used as a noun. When I spoke of being devoted or living with devotion, the word conveyed an attitude of intensity and commitment — of holding nothing back. When you are devoted to something, at least in our language 2000 years ago, it meant that it practically consumed you, that you had intense passion for the object of your devotion. Unless I misunderstood you, your 'devotions', I take it, something you do out of your devotion to Jesus, takes place a few times a week in 30 minutes or less each time. Is it really in your mind that you can grow to know and be like Jesus with that level of investment in the relationship?"

Paul continued: "Equally puzzling is the use of the word 'walk' to describe your relationship with God. Perhaps it is simply an issue of different languages in different times and cultures. Do you speak of one's relationship with God as a 'walk'?"

"Yes," Joe replied. "It's just a metaphor. We use the metaphor of a walk to describe how one is doing in their daily relationship with God."

"That's what I thought I heard you say," answered Paul, "But I never used the idea of a 'walk' as a metaphor. I used other images to describe what the pursuit of a relationship with God and a godly life would look like. Perhaps you recall my words to Timothy where I used images of a soldier, a farmer, and a boxer. In fact, an athlete provides the greatest analogy. Great athletes train hard and run hard...they 'run in such a way as to win the prize.' Those images were given to inspire one to be fully devoted in pursuit of knowing God. I don't think picturing a 'walk' is very inspiring. Walking conveys more a lack of intensity and focus."

"But what about the times you did use the word *walk*?" Joe asked. "Like Colossians, where you prayed that we would 'walk in a manner worthy of the

Lord. That's where we got the idea of looking at our spiritual life as a walk."

"It's probably a function of language," Paul replied. "The word I wrote to the Colossian followers of Jesus 2000 years ago was a word that was identifying the *entire conduct of one's life*. In your language, it would be better understood as *being careful about how you conduct or live out your life*. It was not meant to be a metaphor. Can't you see how the images of an athlete, a soldier, a farmer convey a very different way of life than someone on a walk?"

Joe considered the difference. His answer to Paul's original question about what he did to feed his soul, to grow in his relationship with God looked very little like that of an athlete or a soldier. It was more like a casual walk in the park.

After some time to let what he had shared sink in, Paul spoke, "Imagine an athlete who wants desperately to win a race. He is sincere in his desire. He sees himself as an athlete and winning the race is of great value to him. On the day of the race, he shows up and when the signal is given, he starts out running hard. But a few minutes into the race, he is having trouble breathing, and the muscles in his legs begin to ache. He has to drop out of the race. He has failed. As you talk with him about his frustration and disappointment, it is clear that his desire to win was legitimate. But then you learn about what he did to prepare for the day of the race — the preparation he went through. He tells you that a few times a week, he went for a walk or a brief run. Nothing else in his life was any different than the spectators lining the racecourse. In hearing this, you are not surprised at his dismal performance, and he shouldn't be either. There was no chance of winning through *effort in the moment*. His success, or lack of it, you see clearly, was directly related to how he was living not just on race day, but every day."

"Joe, you are that athlete. On game day, when the temptation to look at pornography comes, you find that you cannot run the race. Your lungs are sucking air and your spiritual muscles are fatigued. You fail, not due to lack of desire, but because just like the runner, you have not been doing the things that allow you to become the kind of person who can finish the race. Does that make sense to you?"

It did. Yet Joe wondered what the "training" would look like. Was it just a matter of a greater commitment of time? More prayer, more Bible study, more meditation, etc.? They sat in silence as Joe contemplated what it might mean for him to become the kind of person who could say no to pornography when the temptation came.

As if he could read his mind, Paul broke the silence. "*So how do you run in such a way as to win the prize?*" Let me say this as clearly as I can: it is not about trying harder to be obedient. I think you try hard. You are simply putting your effort into the wrong thing. What if you were to develop an attraction, a love, a satisfaction so strong that the sexual pleasure you gain through pornography paled by comparison? As is usually the case, the problem is not that you love sexual satisfaction too much but that you haven't really learned to love Jesus enough. When you do, you will recognize pornography not just as a sin, but as something that robs you of the superior joy of a close relationship with Jesus. So, your efforts need to go into the development of that relationship. What you need, and this will change your life, is to have a relationship with Jesus — a close, intimate relationship that you regularly experience as real. Until that happens, you will not have the power nor the desire to give up pornography."

"Paul," Joe interjected, "for a moment I thought you were going somewhere

else, and frankly hoped you were. I think I have heard what you are saying a thousand times before. I know God loves me and I should return his love. If I loved Him I would obey Him. So I better obey as evidence of my love."

Paul replied, "No Joe, it is just the opposite. You need to learn to love Jesus so that you will obey. Obedience flows from love, not the other way around. Jesus said that if we loved him, then we *would* keep his commandments. So what is the cure for disobedience? Is it obedience, or is it love? Jesus said it was love. Your habitual disobedience over many years indicates not that you have an obedience problem, but that you have a love problem. You have been trying to obey Jesus out of duty, and as a way to establish that you love Him. As you have found, duty itself is a poor motivator. Love is a great motivator."

"So," Paul continued, "what can you do to grow your love for Jesus? And let me tell you that the answer is not going to be found in what you have called "devotions." It is going to be found when you take on an attitude about this like that of a soldier, an athlete, a farmer. You want it, and you are willing to make any sacrifice to get it. And the "it" is, as I have said, an intimate, close relationship with Jesus that you experience as real as any human relationship."

"Is that even possible?" Joe asked. "I can't see Jesus, I can't touch Him or hear Him speak. Honestly, most the time my faith seems to be nothing more than believing the right things, hoping I am right, and holding on to the belief that when I die I will finally get to see Him. I know that He loves me. Isn't that all I can expect and hope for in this life?"

"No, it is not," Paul answered. "You need more than to know as a fact that Jesus loves you. You need to experience that love. It seems to me as I hear you talk, and I don't know if you are the exception, or if people in your time and place generally think this way, but it seems as though Christianity is defined by correct belief about Jesus, with little if any real experience of Jesus. There is a big difference between knowing about Jesus and knowing Jesus."

"I'm not sure I understand," Joe countered.

"Let's see if an example can help," Paul replied. "Think about your wife Carol. What if all you had was a book about her? You spent time reading, reflecting, even memorizing portions of the book. You called these your "devotions." You did this for years so that you became an expert on her. You knew everything that there was to know about her. You could describe her appearance and her personality, based on what the book said. And the book was clear on how much she loved you. It was stated as a fact. Now here is the key question. How would that experience be different than the one you are actually having by living with her day after day, hearing her voice, sharing all of life together? I think that there would be no comparison. In the first case you know a lot about her. In the second, you know her. In the same way, Jesus came so that we could know God, not just know about Him.

Joe pondered this for a moment. The difference was clear, but since Jesus was not physically present, it seemed that knowing him was confined to the Book. "I don't see how one can know Jesus in the way someone can know a wife, husband, friend."

"Perhaps a few things I can share with you can help you not only understand how it is possible, but to actually develop that kind of relationship," Paul said. "First, you need to be convinced that this is what Jesus had in mind — that He said it was possible. Do you remember His

invitation to come to Him? He said that we should be yoked with Him — to live in close relationship, and to learn from Him. He promised that He would be with us all the time. John wrote down some of the most important words about how we could be in relationship with Him. Remember? He described himself as a vine, and His followers as branches. He encouraged us to *remain in Him* in that kind of close relationship — where his life would flow into us just like the vine nourishes the branches. Without this kind of connection to him, Jesus said that we could do nothing — which I think includes defeating pornography.”

“The most specific words about this, though, are these. I want to quote them for you so that you see the full impact: *Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him...If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.*

“Notice those words? Jesus wants to *show himself* to us. Jesus and the Father intend to *come and make their home with us*. Sounds like a bit more than believing the truth about Jesus and His love, doesn’t it? Sounds like He wants for us to really experience the truth that He is actually with us.”

Paul became more animated as he continued: “When I wrote my letter to the Ephesian believers, I let them know that I was praying for this very thing for them. Once someone makes the decision to live as a follower of Jesus, this is what I think they need most — to experience him and his love — not just to believe it as fact. You have probably read these words before:

Ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. (Eph 1:16-19)

“I asked God that they would know Jesus better, not *know* about Him, but to know Him. For that to happen, I asked God to open the eyes of their hearts to really see the reality of the message and the person they had embraced.”

“It does take the work and power of God for us to see the One we cannot see, to experience the love that we are told about. And it is something God wants to do. Have you ever asked for God to do this? Consider this prayer in Ephesians 3 and ask yourself if you have ever asked for and longed for this to be true in your life?

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Eph 3:16-19)

“I’ve read that a bunch of times, but never really thought about asking God to do that for me,” Joe replied. “To be honest, I never thought about what those

words were actually saying. As I hear them now, it seems clear that there is a knowing of God's love that kind of goes beyond knowledge."

"Yes!" shouted Paul with a wide grin. "The knowing that surpasses knowledge means that you are actually experiencing his love as real...as real as you would from any person. It takes power, God's power for that to happen, for it has to break through our physical, material world that we live in, a world that will always feel more real to us than anything else. It gets at the question of *what is real*. Not just what is true, but what I experience as real? Without God's intervention, the world you see, hear, smell, touch will always seem like the most real one, and the 'truth' about Jesus will remain an abstract concept that has little ability to impact your life. Why? Because you do not experience it as real."

"I have to leave you in a few moments, so let me give you some direction about how you can begin to experience Jesus as real. If you believe what I am saying to you and what Jesus said is true, then there is a way you can respond."

"Concerning what you call 'devotions,' I encourage you to invest in your relationship with Jesus in a way that is consistent with the meaning of the word 'devotion.' If you are casual and haphazard in how you pursue that relationship, the results will be minimal. You probably know that God has said that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. It has always been that way. Thousands of years before my time Jeremiah the prophet said that we would find God when we seek him with all our heart. If you want to experience Jesus, his love and life-change, then be a passionate, devoted seeker."

"As far as what you do in your devotions, I encourage you to think of it in this way. Let's say that you get up each morning and decide to spend some focused time growing in your relationship with Jesus before moving into your day. In your mind, picture that Jesus has arrived early at the appointed place, perhaps your study in your home. He has turned on the light and He is looking anxiously toward the door, hoping that you will spend time with Him. When the doors opens, your eyes meet and His face lights up. He is so glad to see you! He loves the time you spend together without distractions. So you sit by His side. As you read the Bible, He is looking over your shoulder. You pause, reflect, ask Him to help you understand. You listen for His voice as you read and meditate. You want to learn from Him, as He promised."

"Perhaps you spend some time praying, which is simply having a conversation with Him — He's right there! You don't do all the talking, you also listen. You believe that He wants to help you, to guide you. He certainly can help you as you move into the responsibilities and opportunities of the day."

"Before you leave, sit quietly and hear Him tell you how much you are loved. You rest in that love, in His embrace, in His delight over you. As you get up to leave, He says: 'Joe, how about if I go with you. Let's be together all day.' Remember, He promised to be with us always."

"What I am saying, Joe, is to take what you say you believe to be true, and use your mind, your imagination, to make it real. He is there — see him there! He does speak — strain to hear Him! He does love you — hear Him say that! Experience Him loving you!"

"If you asked God to open the eyes of your heart, if you devoted yourself to seeking Him, and if you began to experience the real presence of Jesus and

His love — do you think pornography could compete with that?”

This had been a lot for Joe to take in. In fact, over the last few minutes of Paul’s discourse, a paradigm shift had occurred. He felt an internal shift. It was hard for him to articulate it, but he knew that Jesus had just become more real. His faith could no longer be confined to a set of beliefs to affirm, but would also be a person to know, to be loved by and love and follow.

Joe finally answered Paul’s question: “Yes. Even now I feel excited about knowing Jesus. I still have a lot of questions, but I sense He is calling me to Himself in a new way. I do want what you’re describing more than anything else — to really know Jesus, not in the abstract, but in reality.”

Paul observed: “If you know the love of God in a way that goes beyond intellectual knowledge, and if you are filled up to the measure of God’s fullness, if that prayer is answered in your life, I don’t think pornography has a chance. His powerful presence and love in your life will be all the motivation you will need. You find you are no longer striving in the flesh, in your own strength to resist the temptation, but will find yourself responding to a superior love, a superior satisfaction.”

The sunlight was just peaking over the horizon and through the window when Joe woke up and realized he was alone. Was it a dream? It seemed to be real. His feet hit the floor with anticipation and expectation as he headed toward his study to spend time with Someone who loved him and was already waiting, longing to spend some time with him.

CONCLUSION

During the past few decades, much has been written about how people change, from both a Christian spiritual and Christian psychological perspective. There has been common ground as well as strong disagreement in these two schools of thought. Is the psychological way, or the spiritual way most effective in helping people, or some hybrid involving both? Can a relationship with God really make a difference, or is additional help needed, especially when dealing with addictions (or should we call them habitual sins)?

Often, in the midst of the discussion and debate over these very important matters that touch us all, the version of Christianity and the spiritual life that is being evaluated for its efficacy in bringing about life-change is the version Joe (and many others) was living. As such, it does not accurately reflect what God has to say about how our relationship with Him actually impacts how we live.

There is no doubt that we are living in a time when there is eroding confidence, even in the Church, that changed lives can occur in a relationship with God. Surveys that show Christians have similar struggles in marriage, substance abuse, sexual immorality, etc as non-Christians have supported this perspective.

Today, it may sound naïve to think that God alone could help people like Joe. People are complex. Motivations behind behavior are deep, hidden, often unconscious. Many sins are actually “addictions” fed and driven by forces that are not easy to identify. This has become the language of sanctification today in many corners of Christianity.

Then there are the thousands of Christians who attend church regularly, engage in Bible study, pray, belong to a small group, and remain in bondage to all kinds of behaviors that seem stubborn

to change. God doesn't seem to be helping much
They do everything their church or pastor tells them to do, and things remain the same.
If having a relationship with God is the key to change, then why so little change?

Joe's conversation with Paul paints a portrait of the possibilities of a life in passionate pursuit of God and a deepening spirituality that the Bible presents as the true message of Jesus. Knowing God is the pathway to a changed life. Yet it is one that is seldom advocated or practiced today. God has to fit into busy schedules. People with no time-margin squeeze God in where they can and yet continue to have expectations of the abundant life Jesus said He came to give. The expectations for a great life remain high while Jesus is relegated to the narrow margins of our lives.

The brand of Christianity Joe was living is one that lacks true knowledge, experiential knowledge, of God. It is a shallow, superficial and thus impotent brand of Christianity. There is no power or possibility of success in its exhortations to simply obey God. Sin continues to hold such people in its stranglehold.

Many sincere people like Joe struggle with sin for years, for decades, living with a truck-load of guilt and shame. This is not the vision Jesus has for His followers. Each one of us is invited into an intimate, fulfilling relationship with Him; His power flows through us when we're connected intimately to Him. It is not our own striving that will free us.

**I am the vine; you are the branches.
Whoever abides in me and I in him,
he it is that bears much fruit,
for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:5)**

Maybe it's surprising that freedom from sin comes with being "yoked" to Jesus. That seemingly limiting act, is done out of love and is freeing and easy. Jesus speaks this invitation to us now as he did 2000 years ago:

**Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and
you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matt 11:28-30)**

Life-change, freedom from sin, and abundant life are the result of being yoked with Jesus.