

# Chapter Six: Heart Surgery

Chapter four discussed diagnosis – discovering problems in the heart. The process of heart diagnosis exposes sins in the motives, decisions, will, attitudes, desires, emotions, thoughts, and beliefs. Step one in recovering from these sins is repentance (chapter five). Repentance, however, is not the only step in overcoming sin. Unless steps are taken to defeat sin in the heart there will be a continued cycle of falling, repenting, then falling again. The purpose of this chapter is to explore ways to help a person once he has repented and is willing to change.

## Don't Forget the Basics

Thinking through all the complexities of the heart can be a daunting task and can leave both counselor and counselee overwhelmed. When this happens, remember the basics – Scripture, prayer, and fellowship. These will solve a great number of problems even when those problems are beyond the understanding of the counselee – much like food strengthens the body whether or not the eater understands the nutritional properties and digestive processes.

Imagine a person going to a doctor because he is feeling weak and lethargic. The doctor asks, “Have you been eating any food?”

“No, I have not had food in several weeks, but that’s not my problem. It goes much deeper than that. Can’t you run some tests on my hormones and blood sugar levels or do a CAT scan or something?”

That doctor will put all his years of medical training to work and tell you, “Go have a sandwich.” It is a simple solution, but it is not superficial. The way the nutrients in a sandwich are absorbed and used in the body are incredibly complex. A person could spend years of his life studying all the reasons he feels better after eating. But it is not necessary for him to understand those reasons. All that is necessary is for him to put some food in his mouth and chew it up and swallow. If he does that and still has a problem, then the doctor will examine the issue further.

A conversation like that with a doctor would sound ridiculous in the physical realm, but it happens all the time in the spiritual realm.

“I’m struggling in my Christian walk.”

“Are you attending a solid, Bible-teaching church every week?”

“No.”

“Are you involved in regular corporate prayer at church?”

“No.”

“Are you a part of a small group during the week where people can get to know you and be involved in your life and know how to pray for you?”

“No.”

“Do you spend time each day in God’s Word and prayer, seeking spiritual nourishment?”

“No.”

“Are you making any concerted effort to pursue deep Christian friendships outside of Sunday morning services?”

“No.”

There is nothing superficial about urging a person like this to focus on the basics. Sustained, long-term spiritual nourishment will result in strengthening in every area of the heart. The solutions below and in the rest of this book can be helpful in areas of particular problems that persist even after the person has been faithful to feed his soul, but the basics of nutrition are always the starting place.

## Correcting Wrong Motives

When the process of diagnosis reveals sinful motives, step one is repentance. Urge the counselee to confess and renounce wrong motives and turn back to God in that area.

Sinful motives are the product of pride (the desire to gain glory for self) and selfishness (placing self ahead of the best interests of others). The solution to both is humility. Assist the counselee in seeking to learn this all-important virtue. (See below under “Correcting Wrong Attitudes”)

Like all sins in the heart, sinful motives spring from wrong beliefs. A second crucial factor in correcting sinful motives, then, is discovering what wrong beliefs underlie them. If a person has motives of self-glorification it may come from the belief that honor from men is more valuable than honor from God. If the motive is revenge the underlying belief may be that God’s justice is not reliable. If the motive is relief from suffering at all cost there may be a problem with believing what God has said in his Word about suffering.

## Correcting Wrong Decisions

### ***Walk by the Spirit***

When a Christian is resolved to choose what is right but finds that he repeatedly chooses what is wrong at the moment of decision it is because he is being controlled by what Paul calls, “the flesh,” and the solution is the walk by the Spirit.

**Galatians 5:16** But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.<sup>1</sup>

The “flesh” is used figuratively by Paul for that part of a Christian that sins. It wars against the believer and constantly pushes in the direction of sin. Fighting against the flesh will always be a losing battle if any method is used other than walking by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit uses Scripture to guide the believer moment by moment on where to take the next step. He uses conscience, emotional impulses, thoughts, particular insights, wise decisions – all informed and powered by Scripture to enable us to keep in step with Him as He leads us. As long as a person keeps in step with the Holy Spirit, that person will be able to resist the impulses of the flesh toward sin. Stepping away from the way the Spirit guides makes one vulnerable to the flesh.

For example, if the Spirit enables a person to know that the best decision on a particular evening would be to go to a Bible study, but the person chooses instead to stay home and do some chores, he is out of step with the Spirit and when temptation strikes he will not succeed in fighting it. If the Spirit makes it clear by means of biblical principles and wisdom that the best decision on a particular evening would be to stay home and not go to the Bible study, but the person goes to the Bible study anyway, again – he will be vulnerable to the power of the flesh when temptation comes. It is by keeping in step with the Spirit that we remain in the bubble of protection that enables us to conquer the flesh.

This is why Scripture so often warns of the danger of flirting with temptation.

**Proverbs 5:8** Keep to a path far from her, do not go near the door of her house.

The fool thinks he can pass nearby temptation’s door, give a few curious glances, even dabble just a bit, but still be able to resist. Prior to the onslaught of temptation it always seems as though resisting would be easy. Prior to being tempted there is no strong desire for the sin, and so there is a feeling of invincibility. Lack of temptation is mistaken for spiritual strength. No doubt Satan goes out of his way to make sure we do not feel any tinges of temptation until he gets us lured in close enough to spring the trap. But as soon as the fool has wandered within reach, temptation reaches out her hands, and the moment they touch him he discovered that her hands are actually handcuffs.

**Ecclesiastes 7:26** I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains. The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare.

The only escape is to walk in a way pleasing to the Lord (walk by the Spirit). The fool who wanders from the Spirit’s guidance will be ensnared when the trap springs.

The question for the believer, then, is not, “Is what I’m doing right now OK?” or “Would God understand, given my circumstances?” or, “Is this hurting anyone?” but rather, “Is this what the Holy Spirit wants me to be doing right now?” If the answer is no then the person is in sin, he is out of step with the Spirit, and he is making himself a sitting duck for the enemy to tempt toward even more destructive sins.

### ***Starve the Flesh***

**Colossians 3:5** Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.

Even after receiving a new nature, still the Christian has sinful desires that are so much a part of him they are like body parts. Those evil desires must be put to death. The word translated “put to death” is a rare term that speaks of death by withering away. The idea is not so much to actively kill something as to neglect it to the point that it withers on the vine.

Imagine you are back in school and you are being terrorized by a bully by the name of Sarx. You complain to the principal, and he responds by giving you Sarx’s meal ticket. So unless you feed him, he cannot eat. After a couple weeks without eating, Sarx is no longer any problem. As long as you have that meal ticket, you can keep him as weak as you want.

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<sup>1</sup> ESV.

*Sarx* is the Greek word for “flesh.” The part of the Christian that sins will weaken if it is not fed. When it is fed, however, it becomes overwhelmingly powerful. The man who struggles with lust clicks on the television at night and see things which are not necessarily pornographic but worldly enough that they feed the flesh, and soon temptation is out of control.

This principle holds whenever the flesh is fed – even if it seems to be in an unrelated area. A person who struggles with overeating might feed the flesh in the morning by giving in to laziness. “I’ll sleep in an extra half hour and just find time to pray later in the day.” Then again a few hours later, “I don’t feel like doing laundry right now. I’ll catch up tomorrow.” With each decision to give in to the impulses of the flesh, *Sarx* gets a little stronger. Then, in mid afternoon, the flesh makes his demands, “A big bowl of ice cream – NOW!” and she responds with a “yes sir” and a bowl of ice cream with a cherry on top. Feeding the flesh 12 hours a day and feeding the the spirit with the Word of God five minutes a day and then expecting spiritual victory is like sowing weeds throughout a field and expecting to harvest wheat.

### ***Understand the Source of Satisfaction***

Obviously there are countless factors that go into why are person decides one way or another. One of the most important is the object to which the person looks for satisfaction of the appetites of the soul. A person resolves to study Scripture, but when the moment of decision comes he decides in favor of watching TV instead, it is because deep down his soul thinks that TV watching will be more satisfying. The allure of sin and the power of temptation will be overwhelming as long as the soul believes the “benefits” of that sin are needed to satisfy its appetites.

This requires a two-part solution. First, instruct the counselee about the food-likeness of God – that God is the only source of joy and satisfaction of the soul, and looking to anything else is a desire disorder (like craving sawdust when one is thirsty) and idolatry (putting a created thing in the place of God). For an explanation of this principle review the section titled “Desire and Righteous Living” in chapter four. Once the counselee understands this principle, step two is to retrain the desires.

### **Correcting Wrong Desires**

The reason the pleasures of this life exist is to teach us what it is like to be in the presence of God. They are samples of heaven. Desires become corrupted when earthly delights are seen as the sources of joy and satisfaction, rather than as mere “straws” through which the water of God is enjoyed (For an explanation of this principle review the section titled “Desire and Righteous Living” in chapter four). To guard us from this mistake God sometimes allows the pleasures of this world to leave us dry and empty. He allows them to be a straw with no water on the other end so we are reminded that the straw has no power in itself to quench the thirst of the soul and is not a joy-source.

### ***Make much of the world’s failures to satisfy***

Urge the counselee to take notice and preach to his soul whenever earthly things leave him empty: “Do you see that soul? Nothing in this world can satisfy your hunger and thirst!” Of course there is temporary pleasure associated with earthly things, but apart from an experience of the presence of God it is a pleasure that not only fails to satisfy the soul, but once the fleeting pleasure is gone it leaves an even greater sense of emptiness and craving than before.

### ***Look beyond the straw***

When the pleasures of this world do bring a sense of satisfaction and joy, the sermon to self becomes, “Don’t get confused soul – this sense of satisfaction isn’t coming from the straw (the pleasurable activity, relationship, music, etc.). It is coming from the water itself (the presence of God). The only reason this activity is producing a sense of satisfaction and joy is that God is graciously granting that the end of the straw be dipped into the water of His presence.” Remind the counselee to never let a satisfying experience attract his soul to an earthly thing. Use all the delights of life to cause the soul to be attracted to the Source of the satisfaction that comes through those delights – the presence of God.

All satisfying experiences and all unsatisfying experiences, then, will assist the person in repairing desire disorder.

**Scriptures for changing desires:** Isaiah 55:2, Jeremiah 2:13, Psalm 36:7-8, Psalm 63:5, Psalm 4:7, Jonah 2:8

### Sermons on changing desires::

- “Loving God with All Your Heart” sermon series<sup>2</sup>
- “Righteousness and Possessions” sermon series<sup>3</sup>

## Correcting Wrong Attitudes

Attitude (Greek – *phroneo*) refers to one’s outlook on something or someone. An attitude is sinful if it does not conform to God’s, and so the solution to sinful attitudes is to understand the beauty and goodness of God’s attitude. Again, step one is repentance. Very often the counselee will have repented of specific sinful words and actions, but not for his sinful attitude in general.

One of the most common attitude problems is a negative, unloving attitude toward a particular person. When the counselee notices everything that person does wrong, nothing that person does right, and tends to cast a negative light on everything about that person – that is an attitude that conflicts with God’s way of looking at that person. Urge the counselee to spend time studying and thinking deeply about God’s heart toward that person. Remind him of what was going through the mind of God toward that person when He sacrificed His own Son so that person could be forgiven. A good exercise for reversing a negative attitude toward someone is to always think of that person whenever Scripture speaks of God’s love. Normally when we hear sermons or read books about God’s love we think in terms of His love for us. Urge the counselee to think instead of God’s love toward that individual.

Another common attitude sin is pessimism. The pessimist assumes God will probably send the most painful, troublesome circumstance rather than a delightful one. This reflects a distorted view of God’s nature. Correct this attitude by helping open the counselee’s eyes to the goodness of God. This is done by studying passages of Scripture that speak of His kindness and goodness and by pointing out examples of God’s kindness in the person’s life. Teach the counselee to cultivate a lifestyle of gratitude toward God for past, current, and future blessings.

A third common attitude problem is an aversion toward authority. When a person has a negative, ungrateful view of authority teach him from Scripture about the blessedness of being led by God. It is a great privilege to be guided through this life and shown the right way to go. And God delegates His authority to human authorities. (Ro.13:1-2) Even when those human authorities make foolish decisions, if what they are requiring is not sin then the person under authority can be assured that the mandates from that authority are the very will of God for him. Teach him to delight in knowing the will of God!

Two other common attitude problems are pride and selfishness. The solution to both is humility.

**Scriptures for teaching humility:** Philippians 2:1-11, Luke 18:9-14, 1 Peter 5:5, Psalm 35:13

### Sermons on humility:

- “The Right Side of the Bus” (Mt.5:3)<sup>4</sup>
- “The Sooners and the Soft” (Mt.5:5)<sup>5</sup>
- “Fasting” parts 1-2 (Mt.6:16-18)<sup>6</sup>
- “Logectomy” (Mt.7:3-5)<sup>7</sup>
- “Learning Humility” parts 1,2 (Eph.4:2)<sup>8</sup>
- “Humility” parts 1-16 (Php.2)<sup>9</sup>
- “Ingredients of Joyful Worship” (2 Sam.6:13-23)<sup>10</sup>

**Other resources for learning humility:** The book “Humility” by C.J. Mahaney

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<sup>2</sup> [http://foodforyoursoul.net/ffys\\_v2/?page\\_id=37&series=1](http://foodforyoursoul.net/ffys_v2/?page_id=37&series=1)

<sup>3</sup> [http://foodforyoursoul.net/ffys\\_v2/?page\\_id=37&series=78](http://foodforyoursoul.net/ffys_v2/?page_id=37&series=78)

<sup>4</sup> [http://foodforyoursoul.net/ffys\\_v2/?page\\_id=37&book\\_key=40&chapter=5](http://foodforyoursoul.net/ffys_v2/?page_id=37&book_key=40&chapter=5)

<sup>5</sup> [http://foodforyoursoul.net/ffys\\_v2/?page\\_id=37&book\\_key=40&chapter=5](http://foodforyoursoul.net/ffys_v2/?page_id=37&book_key=40&chapter=5)

<sup>6</sup> [http://foodforyoursoul.net/ffys\\_v2/?page\\_id=37&series=77](http://foodforyoursoul.net/ffys_v2/?page_id=37&series=77)

<sup>7</sup> [http://foodforyoursoul.net/ffys\\_v2/?page\\_id=37&book\\_key=40&chapter=7](http://foodforyoursoul.net/ffys_v2/?page_id=37&book_key=40&chapter=7)

<sup>8</sup> [http://foodforyoursoul.net/ffys\\_v2/?page\\_id=37&book\\_key=49&chapter=4](http://foodforyoursoul.net/ffys_v2/?page_id=37&book_key=49&chapter=4)

<sup>9</sup> [http://foodforyoursoul.net/ffys\\_v2/?page\\_id=37&series=33](http://foodforyoursoul.net/ffys_v2/?page_id=37&series=33)

<sup>10</sup> [http://foodforyoursoul.net/ffys\\_v2/?page\\_id=37&book\\_key=10&chapter=6](http://foodforyoursoul.net/ffys_v2/?page_id=37&book_key=10&chapter=6)

## Correcting Wrong Emotions

Sinful emotions are another area where repentance must be emphasized because the idea that emotions can be sinful is so foreign to our culture. Anything in a person's life that does not conform to the standards of God's Word must be repented of, including ungodly feelings. Repentance of wrong emotions, however, is more difficult because emotions are the result of assessments and beliefs. A situation is assessed by the mind, and that assessment is weighed against the norms of the belief system, and the feeling that result is emotion.<sup>11</sup> Whenever an emotion violates Scripture it is either because the situation is being assessed incorrectly or the belief system is flawed. Some of the most common emotional problems are anger, fear, worry, apathy, fretting, discouragement, and depression. Each of these will be discussed in depth in chapter 7 "Mood (Emotional?) Problems"

## Correcting Wrong Thoughts

The most difficult aspect of self-control is discipline in the thought life. It is so much easier to think a thought than to carry out an action, that if there is any willingness to sin at all it will come out in the thought life.

### ***Fighting Obsessive Thoughts***

Very often counselees will suffer from a thought pattern that relentlessly dominates the thinking. A person prone to depression might obsessively think along hopeless lines until he falls into a downward spiral. The addict becomes preoccupied with thoughts about the object of his desire until the flesh finally overwhelms him. The person crippled by worry or fear becomes preoccupied with painful possibilities until the negative emotions become too strong to fight. People with eating problems have out-of-control thoughts about food or body shape. Most self-control problems have at the root a lack of self-control in the thought life, which is why transformation comes, in large part, through the renewing of the *mind*.

**Romans 12:2b ... be transformed by the renewing of your mind.**

Techniques for behavioral change that do not enable greater self-control in the thought life will be temporary fixes if they do anything at all.

### ***Steps in the Wrong Direction***

The overall direction of one's life is dictated by the direction of the various steps he takes, and those steps begin in the mind. How does a woman go from being a faithful, loyal wife to committing adultery and leaving her husband? It is the culmination of a series of steps in the direction of unfaithfulness. She faces the normal struggles of all married people (her husband displays his areas of weakness and inadequacy as a husband, he hurts her and sins against her), and the temptation to focus on his faults begins to arise in her heart, resulting in an increasing bitterness and resentment. She is taking steps in the wrong direction.

From time to time some attractive person comes along or some enticing fantasy comes into her head. In years past she has simply pushed such thoughts out as soon as they arose. But one day she decides to entertain them a little bit—she does not dwell on it or obsess about it—she just allows herself to daydream about it for a few seconds. Then she pushes it out of her mind and gets on with her life. More steps. It seems like such a minor thing, she forgets it even happened. As far as she is concerned, she is just as committed to her husband as ever. The next time a tempting thought like that comes along she indulges herself for several seconds—maybe a full minute—then puts it out of her mind. Sixty more steps. Over the course of a year or two the process continues, until she is entertaining tempting thoughts for several minutes at a time, several times a day.

Up to this point she has not taken a single external action that would indicate anything other than total faithfulness to her husband, but in her thinking she has been taking steps away from the Lord and toward sin, and those steps have carried her far from the right path.

Eventually the temptation she has invited to come inside the door of her heart rises up. She allows a friendship with a man at work to go a little too far. He has never touched her. They have not talked about anything inappropriate in any way, but she becomes closer friends with him than with her husband. From there the friendship progresses to something else.

At some point she finds she is obsessed with thinking about another man and says, "Wait a minute; this is sin, I need to stop this." But she cannot. Thoughts of him bombard her mind. No matter how hard she tries to push them away, they

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<sup>11</sup> See chapter four for a fuller explanation.

persist. To her it seems these thoughts are coming completely out of the blue—but that is not true. They are the result of a long process of undisciplined thinking. Finally she finds temptation too hard to fight and simply gives in to it.

A similar process of wrong thinking can be seen at the heart of virtually any of the problems for which people seek counseling. It is **what lies behind overeating, depression, anxiety, addiction, and many other problems that involve thinking obsessions.** There will be no success in changing wrong behavior without getting control of the thought life.

### ***Guard the Door***

Since ungodly thoughts are so difficult to escape once they find a home in the mind, the most important strategy in striving for a righteous thought life is in guarding the mind so wrong thoughts do not enter in the first place. It is impossible to keep all sinful thoughts out, but much can be done to reduce the volume of incoming sinful thoughts.

- Cut back on sources of sinful thoughts – Urge the counselee to think through what influences tend to get their wrong thoughts started. Television? Movies? A magazine? A particular friend or group of friends? To whatever degree possible, slam closed the doors through which the evil thoughts are entering.
- Listen to Christian music – The lyrics of secular music, even if they are not overtly evil, are worldly. Listening to good Christian music for ten minutes can introduce many dozens of biblical thoughts and ideas into the mind. The likelihood of having that many biblical thoughts while listening to secular music for ten minutes is far smaller.
- Memorize Scripture – Memorization requires such a high level of concentration that it is far less likely that sinful thoughts will be able to enter the mind while reviewing memorized passages of Scripture. And even in moments when one is not directly thinking about those passages, they tend to lie in the background of the thoughts and are available for the Holy Spirit to call to mind at any moment. And it is remarkable how often the Spirit does just that!
- Listen to good sermons – Websites such as [www.DesiringGod.org](http://www.DesiringGod.org), [www.GTY.org](http://www.GTY.org), and [www.FoodForYourSoul.net](http://www.FoodForYourSoul.net) offer expository sermon mp3's that can be searched by topic or Scripture passage, and can be downloaded free. A person desiring to gain control of the thought life can pick a topic or passage of interest, load several sermons onto an mp3 player or cell phone, and listen to them while doing household chores, commuting, etc.

### ***Steps in the Right Direction***

What about the sinful thoughts that make it through the defenses and find a place in the person's thinking? How does one rid himself of wrong thoughts?

For the next five seconds try not to picture an elephant in your mind. How did you do? Impossible! The surest way to get yourself to think about something is to try not to think about it. The mind runs continuously, so the only way to successfully push something out of your mind is to replace it with something else. Let's try again – for the next 5 seconds, instead of thinking about elephants, think about a fire truck. A little easier this time? Like the demons in Luke 11:24-26, evil thoughts that are expelled will return with a vengeance if they are not crowded out of the mind altogether with good thoughts.

**Philippians 4:8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things.**

When sinful thoughts arise in the mind (lustful images, thoughts of revenge, self-pity, pride, worry, etc.) they must be crowded out by godly thoughts. Arm the counselee with passages of God's Word that address the area of concern.

### ***Eternal Perspective'***

**Colossians 3:1 Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.**

The more one thinks about everything in life from a biblical point of view the more attractive God's way appears. Righteousness becomes more appealing and sin becomes repulsive. In the words of John Piper, "When you begin to be lazy and allow your thoughts to become earthly, at first it doesn't seem like any damage is done, but in the weeks to come you pay the price: Your life sinks into shallowness, powerlessness, vulnerability to sin, preoccupation with trifling little things, superficial relationships, and a frightening loss of interest in worship and the things of God."<sup>2</sup>

Why is it that a temptation can be so overpowering on a Friday night or Monday afternoon, but that same temptation on a Sunday morning at church has not pull at all? It is because on Sunday morning the attention is set on things above. Spending an hour or two thinking about things from an eternal perspective enables the heart to see things as they really are. When spiritual vision is clear, righteousness is beautiful and desirable, and sin is ugly and repulsive. After spending

several hours (or days) thinking about things from an earthly, temporal, worldly perspective, spiritual vision becomes distorted. Sin becomes attractive and righteousness begins to appear boring, stuffy, and unappealing, and when that happens temptation will feel irresistible.

Imagine yourself seated at a table salivating over a plate of your favorite food at dinner time. Your desire for this food is so compelling that it is all you can do to wait until the family is seated to begin eating. Powerful desires. Would it be possible at that moment to change those desires? Erase them altogether? Is there something a counselor could say that would turn them off like a switch?

Yes! Imagine just before you place the first bit into your mouth you hear your wife say, “Uh Oh – I just realized – I grabbed the wrong box. Instead of seasoning I put rat poison into the food.” At that moment you realize that if you put that bite of food in your mouth it will result in violent illness and possibly death. At that moment you see the truth about the food, and suddenly all desire for it is gone! When poison is seen for what it is, desire for it evaporates.

Satan takes sin, which is like the disgusting, sickening sludge scraped off the bottom of a garbage dumpster, and disguises it to look like a wonderful plate of food. Spending the day thinking about things from a biblical, eternal perspective enables one to see sin for what it really is, and it loses its appeal.

For most people this requires making some changes. If a person fills his day with television, secular reading, secular music, secular talk shows, secular conversation, etc., he will be unable to view life from an eternal perspective. Thinking on things above requires significant effort. Turning away from the attractions of the world and focusing on Scripture memorization, meditation, listening to Christian music, spiritual conversation, etc., is crucial.

## Correcting Wrong Beliefs

**Galatians 2:20** The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Nothing is more central to living the Christian life than faith – trusting the Lord Jesus Christ. Everyone’s life is based on confidence in *something* – either confidence in something God has said (faith) or confidence in something God has not said (presumption). Living by faith in God, then, means trusting in what God has promised.

**2 Peter 1:4** Through (his glory and goodness) he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

It is through faith in the promises that we escape the corruption caused by evil desires. God has promised that His way will always be more beneficial to us than sin – no exceptions. If we choose sin, then, it is because we do not believe that promise. His promises of provision rule out worry, His promises of justice rule out revenge, His promises of reward rule out laziness, His promises of forgiveness rule out self-condemnation, His promises of glory rule out discouragement.

The Lord desires not only that we conquer sin, but that we do so by means of trusting in His great and precious promises. If we conquer sin any other way it shows us to be impressive and says little about Him. But if we defeat sin by trusting in His promises it points to Him as trustworthy, generous, powerful, desirable, and good.

It is crucial that the every possible step be taken to persuade the counselee of the fact that an experience of God’s presence really would be more satisfying than the pleasure of the sin. As long as there is a sense that the person is “missing out” by saying no to temptation, victory will not last long. If resisting a sin feels to the soul like a loss rather than gain, resolve will soon falter. The only long term way to resist pleasure is with a greater pleasure.

How, then, can beliefs be changed? A man can tell himself a million times that God’s presence is far more satisfying than pornography, but if he continues to prefer immorality at the moment of temptation, clearly his soul is not convinced. So how does he persuade his soul to believe the truth?

## Through Scripture

**Romans 10:17** faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.

Faith comes through hearing the Word of God. When a person discovers an area of unbelief or weak faith the solution is saturation with all that God’s Word says in that area. “Hearing” the Word occurs through reading, studying, biblical conversation, listening to recordings of Scripture, meditation, memorization, and, most of all, faithful, accurate, passionate, expository preaching. In the Gospels and Acts we see that preaching is the primary method God has ordained for penetrating the hearts of people with His Word.

Teach the person to seek God with an attitude of expectance, like David, when his soul was dry in Psalm 63.

**Psalm 63:1** O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land

### **where there is no water. ... 5 My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods**

To the degree that one has fellowship with God that person's soul *will be* satisfied. Psalm 34:8 does not say, "Taste and see *if* the Lord is good," but "**Taste and see that the LORD is good.**"<sup>12</sup>

God is everywhere present all the time and yet the Christian is not full and satisfied all the time. This is because even though the Christian has access to God perpetually, he is not always *drinking and eating* (that is, experiencing the food-likeness) of God. When the prophets wrote of their hunger and thirst for God they were describing their desire to have an experience of fellowship with God in which their souls enjoyed and were nourished, strengthened, refreshed, sustained, and satisfied by direct involvement with one or more of God's attributes.

When a particular sin has dominating, overwhelming power over a person it is because that person believes the cravings of his soul cannot be satisfied any other way. Saying "no" to that sin means saying "no" to being happy – or at least to having the longing of his soul satisfied. Helping the person understand the amazing fact of the food-likeness of God is not all there is to winning the battle, but it is a crucial first step because it breaks the power of the temptation by opening his eyes to the fact that great satisfaction is available apart from that sin.

In most cases it takes more than a single conversation to bring a person to truly believe and trust in the doctrine of the food-likeness of God. One way to help the person you are counseling is to urge her to go through the daily devotionals in Appendix One of this book. These devotionals are the first 20 in the book *Drawing Near to His Presence*.

### ***Through Experience***

Beliefs are also formed through experiences. If the man's experiences with pornography have always been pleasurable and his experiences with prayer and Scripture have usually been boring and unsatisfying, his soul will never buy it when he tries to say, "Resist this temptation because the presence of God will be more satisfying than this sin." For that argument to be compelling to the soul there must be a track record of delightful experiences with the presence of God. Teach the counselee to develop a habit of interpreting all the times of joy and fullness in life as illustrations of what it is like to be in God's presence, and to interpret all periods of emptiness and dryness as illustrations of what it is like to be distanced from His presence.

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<sup>12</sup> Calvin observes, "The words literally rendered are, *Taste and see, for the Lord is good*; but the particle 'כ, *ki, for*, is taken exegetically. David's meaning, therefore, is, that there is nothing on the part of God to prevent the godly, to whom he particularly speaks in this place, from arriving at the knowledge of his goodness by actual experience." John Calvin, *Psalms*.