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How Did I Get Here?

Guest: Jay Stringer
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Bob: Like a lot of men in our world today, Jay Stringer had a pornography issue in his life, and as much as he tried he could not make it go away.

Jay: My whole life, I had asked God to help me stop my lust, but how do I actually invite God to help me understand why I'm drawn to it in the first place? So that's, I really think, part of the task within sexual brokenness, is not to just try and stop your lust, but to really study, "Why is it that I'm drawn to pornography at this stage?"

So, part of what I think God is inviting us into is to really be curious about how our sexual brokenness came to be.

Bob: This is *FamilyLife Today*. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson, and I'm Bob Lepine.

Have you ever stopped to think about what it is you're trying to satisfy when you give in to sexual temptation or sexual sin? We're going to talk about that today with Jay Stringer; stay with us.

And welcome to *FamilyLife Today*. Thanks for joining us.

We're going to be dealing with a subject today that has to be in epidemic proportions, although as soon as I say that I think, "This has been an issue throughout the history of the world," so, is it epidemic in our day, or has it just been more hidden in past days?

But you see it as a pastor. You see the issue of lust showing up all the time.

Dave: All the time. I would love to say that it's only in the people I'm preaching to, but it's in me. Yes, it's something that I've battled my whole life, and it's something you address every single hour, every single day in ministry when you're trying to help people.

Bob: And not just a male issue.

Dave: Yes.

Ann: Yes, it's a female issue, and I believe it's a growing female issue, and it affects every single home, and so often it's in the dark, and no one knows, and it's a secret. That really affects how we're dealing with everything.

Bob: The reason I framed it as a conversation around lust is because we're trying to get to the root of what manifests itself in a wide variety of expressions, whether that's people looking at pornography or it's adultery or it's premarital sexual involvement or—we could go on down the list; we don't need to. All of that can be traced back to a heart issue.

Dave: Yes, and I'm excited today, because we're going to get to the root. So often people don't go there, and we get to go there today.

Bob: Jay Stringer's going to help us do that. Jay, welcome to *FamilyLife Today*.

Jay: Thank you for having me!

Bob: Jay is an author, he's a counselor, a therapist in Seattle, Washington, a graduate of the Seattle school. He's written a book called *Unwanted*, and the subtitle is *How Sexual Brokenness Reveals Our Way to Healing*. This has become for you in clinical practice kind of the bull's-eye of what you're dealing with, right?

Jay: It is. Yes. So, as a therapist, a lot of people were coming to see me, and they started talking about different struggles that they were having with pornography, infidelity... What I started recognizing was that most of the strategies and techniques that people had been given were primarily what I would just refer to as "lust management." So this was a lot of the bouncing of your eyes, trying to stop the flow of lust.

So what I started recognizing is that this really is not getting to the root of the issue, that a lot of times the clients that were coming to see me had been really using the same type of pornography from the time that they were 15, and now they were using the same exact search engine search when they were 38.

Bob: Wow.

Jay: So I started recognizing that, unless we really radically change this conversation, we're going to continue to consign people to a lifetime of futility with this issue, and I just don't think it needs to be that way.

Bob: You said the breakthrough for you in this issue was to ask the question, "Why?" Not just to look at the behavior, but to say, "What's really going on in my affections and in my heart?" Where did that journey take you?

Jay: Yes. This was near the end of seminary, grad school, and I wanted to start having a lot more integrity with regard to some of the struggles that I was having with pornography and definitely some of my sexual fantasies that had been with me since I was a teenager.

When I was working through this with my therapist, one of the questions that she asked me was to “tell me a little bit about the things that you’re struggling with.” One of the things that she highlighted was the role that I had come to play in my family, and highlighted some of the gifts that God has given to me with regard to, “What does it mean for me as a man to see brokenness and heartache in people’s lives, and then to offer something of myself to them in the midst of their heartache?” She said, “That’s why you want to be a therapist.”

And yet, what I wasn’t kind of making the connection between is that was also what was getting woven into my sexual life as well.

Bob: Okay, I don’t understand the connection between wanting to be a helper and you looking at pornography.

Ann: Yes. Share with us, what did that look like in your family? What happened?

Jay: So, in my family, my dad was a minister, so—I’m only 35, but I know I’m dating myself to say that this was before cell phones, before email. So when they would try to get ahold of my dad, they would first call the church office, and then if they couldn’t get ahold of him there they would go and call our home phone.

So what happened is people within our congregation would leave voicemails, and this could be anything from a mental health crisis to—one that I really remember was, an elder’s wife called and said that “my husband just had an affair.”

So what I remember feeling in those moments is—

Ann: Well, did you hear those messages?

Jay: I heard those messages, yes.

Ann: Okay.

Jay: And could kind of tell that, “Everything is not well. Everything that you’re seeing on Sunday morning is not really what’s going on in people’s lives.” That was really intriguing for me, as a young kid, to kind of recognize there’s so much more to people’s stories than you would ever see just on a Sunday morning.

So what would happen was my dad would go and attend to a lot of these crises, but then I would watch my mom’s face become sad, at times angry, for my dad’s

involvement within the church life. So as a middle child and just someone that I think God has really made my heart sensitive to heartache and to brokenness, that was part of the way that I would engage my mom, to just say, “Can I help out with the dishes? Can I do some vacuuming? Let’s go shopping together.” So that became part of the role that I played in my family, was to help soothe people in the midst of heartache.

There was a point in college where I was on Instant Messenger, and this person, random pop-up came through and said, basically, “Hi, do you want to start chatting?” I didn’t know anything about, you know, sexually explicit stuff on Instant Messenger at that point, and this person had sent me a photo, and it was really innocent, really beautiful, and I kind of bit, hook, line, and sinker.

Within a couple minutes she sent me another link to a pornography site. That was all around mother-oriented pornography. So there was something about that theme that something in my heart merged with, “I want this.” That was a really, really significant turning point for me with regard to getting latched onto pornography. I had seen it from time to time, but there was something about those themes that that was becoming latched on into my heart.

So what my therapist did many years later was to kind of help me to identify [that] some of the fantasies and some of the pornography searches actually had their origins further back than I would have ever conceived of.

Bob: So, you’re saying that how we get to indulging lust, whatever that looks like, is rooted in things that are not sexual at all?

Jay: What I’m saying is that one of the things that I needed to do was—my whole life I had asked God to help me stop my lust, but what my therapist was really inviting me into is, “How do I actually invite God to help me understand why I’m drawn to it in the first place?” So that’s, I really think, part of the task within sexual brokenness, is not to just try and stop your lust, but to really listen to it. Study, “Why is it that this particular fantasy is always the thing that gets me when I’m on a business trip?” or, “Why is it that whenever my spouse turns down intimacy I’m drawn to pornography at this stage?”

So, part of what I think God is inviting us into is to really be curious about how our sexual brokenness came to be, because when we’re at the height of our sexual brokenness all that we can see is our shame and failure, which then sets up strategies and techniques to try and stop it.

You know, I think part of what God does is God approaches us with curiosity to say, “How did this become to be?” Because part of what we all know is that the present sin is so often the door that opens up the wider work of the gospel to bring healing and transformation to our lives. So what I thought was this kind of random issue of pornography was actually inviting me back into a lot of the family wounds and emotional

pain that I had never addressed, and they were showing up in my pornography use, but I had never gone back to actually heal some of the initial pain from that family system.

Bob: Okay, you know there are some folks who are hearing this conversation and going, “Okay, it sounds like Jay’s saying you’re not responsible for what you were doing when you were looking at stuff on the Internet when you were on Instant Messenger.” That’s not what you’re saying, is it?

Jay: That’s not what I’m saying. One of the things that I love about the Scripture is that they hold honor and honesty together, that we know that Abram, for instance, trafficked his wife. We know some of the most difficult things about the patriarchs and the kings of Israel because Scripture is always holding honor and honesty together.

So this process of kind of going back to some of the original pain is not about blaming your parents, but, like a good historian, you’re trying to understand, “How did this story actually form, and how do we make sure that we don’t repeat it in the future?”

One of the things that I think we talk about too much within evangelical circles is that we usually think about sexual brokenness in terms of, “It’s only an issue of lust.” What I would say is if the river of unwanted sexual behavior is flowing, that’s fed by a lot of different tributaries. That could be anger, that could be lust. So if we’re only focusing on lust, we’re actually missing so much of the other stuff that’s at play with regard to our sexual brokenness.

One of the things that some of Dr. Patrick Carnes—one of the things that he recognized was that 78 percent of addicts report coming from homes that are very rigid, and 87 percent report coming from families that are very disengaged. So, the reason why this is so important is because if you’re growing up in a very rigid family (this is a lot of rules, lots of regulations, usually one parent is ruling with an iron fist), part of what you realize is that they’re using their power in order to intimidate, and sometimes to invade, your life.

So, as a child, what do you do in the midst of being powered over, feeling like someone has complete authority? That’s often the context where, when you begin to get bonded to pornography, part of the appeal to that is that “now I have this realm that’s secretive, that no one else knows about, and I can actually get exactly what I want when I want it.” You don’t have that anywhere else in your life, so one of the initial things that happens within a rigid family is that there’s anger that’s brewing beneath the surface of that type of person.

So much later in life, whenever you’re in the midst of someone else, like a boss, an employer, a spouse that looks like they have more power than you, one of the ways that you learned how to get through that as a child was actually to go to pornography, not just for lust, but, “Oh, here’s this realm that I have unlimited power and I can get exactly what I want when I want it.”

Dave: I mean, hearing that as parent scares you. It's like, "How in the world can I manage this precious balance, you know, that my son or daughter doesn't spin off into some addictive thing because of the way I'm treating him?" You know, I'm a dad of three sons, so I'm listening thinking there are parents going, "Okay, how do I do this in a way that doesn't allow this to happen to my son or daughter?" What would you say?

Jay: Yes. What you're—I mean, I think part of just even your heart to ask that question is so much of kind of the part two of that, which is, most parents are more disengaged when they realize something about that, and what happens within disengagement is that when you're going through something really difficult (maybe it could be a father or a mother that was really strict, you're going through bullying or some type of abuse at school), if you didn't have anyone that was there to hold you, to attune to you, to be able to say, "How are you? Your face looks different today," part of what you learn is that intimacy is not found within a family system, it's found outside of one.

So this is a lot of the initial seeds that begin to get formed with regard to lust, is that, "I can't really trust close relationships or a family system to actually be the place where I can be known and loved in the midst of that," so I begin to look for things that are external to the family in order to provide something of that.

Bob: I tend to think that the issues of lust that we're dealing with in our culture today are because we live in a hyper-sexualized culture. I mean, I remember talking with one of your professors and a mentor to you, Dan Allender, and I said, "So, sexual abuse—" because he's written on sexual abuse, "sexual abuse; what are the statistics?"

He goes, "Well, it depends on how you define sexual abuse." He said at one level, 100 percent of people who live in America have been sexually abused.

I said, "What do you mean?"

He said, "Have you ever seen an ad on TV that's sexually exploitive?"

I go, "Sure, everybody has."

He goes, "That's my point. You've been sexually abused."

So, this hyper-sexualized culture we live in—I tend to think that's the problem. If we'd just turn it down in the culture, it would turn down in our lives. But I hear you saying there are other factors, maybe deeper factors, than just our hyper-sexualized culture.

Jay: Indeed. Yes. So, one of the things we found was that people who were the most significant users of pornography use had sexual abuse scores that were nearly 24 percent higher than those who did not view pornography at all. So I think that's one thing that we need to be really careful about.

Part of what gets all the attention is you see this 17-year-old, or you see this 40-year-old person who's struggling with sexual addiction, but you never actually go back to where was their sexual story first corrupted. Why this is so important is that if most of us are growing up in families that have some level of rigidity and disengagement, the first experiences of sexual abuse (whether that's someone introduces you to porn or someone that eventually molests you) is that they are not going to start with sexual exploitation.

What they're going to do is they're going to say, "Hey, Jay, you have a really nice arm. Let's go play catch," or, "Let's go and play this video game. I know that your parents don't really allow any type of entertainment, so let's just go play."

So what your body initially experiences is the sense of rest, and oxytocin, even, that when you're touched, when you're loved, and you're saying, "This is the best thing ever." But then as the abuse and the grooming process goes on, what your body begins to feel is some cortisol, some stress of, "Should this be happening? Should this not be happening?"

But then they introduce you to something like pornography or a part of their body that you've never seen before, and the way that God has wired our brains is to actually feel excitement, to feel arousal. So then you're feeling some dopamine within your system, and what I want to underscore is this is a highly, highly chaotic cocktail that's getting mixed. You're feeling bonded to someone, but at the same time you're feeling stress, and then you're feeling arousal. What in the world are you supposed to do with that?

So what ends what happening much later in life, much to people's surprise, is that they don't feel sexually alive unless they're remixing that original cocktail. So then they find themselves on a business trip and someone notices, "Wow, you've done a lot with your career." Then it becomes very sexual and you feel arousal.

So what they don't really recognize is that they're actually remixing some of the original trauma cocktail that was established for them in the sexual abuse, but they're only seeing it through the lens of, "I'm just a deeply broken sexual man that struggles with an addiction," rather than going back to say, "Where was your sexual story stolen from you?"

Bob: We're going to explore this subject in greater detail, but I just want to know, are you suggesting that if we can dig back, be the archeologist, find where that extension cord is plugged in, and where were we first broken, that we can get to a point in life where we are free from having to battle lust?

Jay: What I'm saying is that—I think of Jesus's words around, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." Many of us would say that we go to pornography,

some type of an affair, for some version—maybe a compromised, idolatrous version of comfort.

So part of what I would say back to you is, why are you outsourcing your comfort to something that brings greater shame to you? Why not go back to some of the formative experiences of your own heartache, where, as you begin to attend to these stories, something in your heart begins to break for that little boy or for that little girl in terms of what she was exposed to and the sexual story she got caught up in? Where there is grief, there will be change.

Bob: This is kind of deep water, right? Don't you agree?

Jay: We are swimming in the deep end, yes, no question about it.

Ann: But it's really good.

Jay: Yes, and what I'm excited about as we keep talking is, okay, so you as you trace that back to the root, the next question is, "Okay, why do I stay there if I've found the root?" and then, "How do I get out?"

Bob: Yes.

Jay: That's where we need to go.

Bob: Pretty sober, pretty powerful conversation today with Jay Stringer, and David Robbins, who's the President of FamilyLife, is here with us. We got into some deep water, didn't we?

David: Yes, we are in the deep end, and I think it's really good for all of us to get into these deep waters and to process it. I think what's central to what Jay has been bringing us and asking the question, "Do we believe God is distant and unattached, do we functionally live out life that way, or do we believe that truly He is nearby and involved?" If we believe He is distant, we are left to deal with all of the issues we've been talking about today that we each have in our lives, and they all show up in different ways. We're left to deal with those on our own.

But if He's near and involved, we're never facing this alone. God enters His people's struggles and leads us out of our issues! He restores us, he reconciles us. So it makes perfect sense that God would walk into our personal brokenness and backstories if we let Him in, and He will lead us out of it for our good—for our families' good, for our personal good, and for the world, generation after generation.

I just simply say, don't try to do this on your own.

Bob: Yes.

David: Do what Jay did. Let God in to help understand why you're drawn to particular sin patterns—why do you keep going back to them?—and not just trying to stop it without the deeper understanding.

Bob: Yes. And that means time in the Word, it means time in prayer, it means time with godly counselors who can help reveal the purposes and the will of God. That's good, David. Thank you for that.

Michelle: *FamilyLife Today* is a production of FamilyLife. And our goal is to develop godly families and marriages that change the world one home at a time. One of the ways we do that is through this radio broadcast, *FamilyLife Today*. We also partner with people around the world, people who share our same desire to see strong marriages and families and these people are sharing FamilyLife resources in their countries, maybe that's yours.

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We'd love to hear from you. You are part of the FamilyLife family and we want to know how God is using *FamilyLife Today* in your life. Bob.

Bob: We hope you can join us again tomorrow. Jay Stringer's going to be here again, and we're going to talk about what is really going on in our hearts. What's the hunger that we're trying to satisfy when we give in to sexual temptation and sexual sin? We'll talk more about that tomorrow, and I hope you can join us for that.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our hosts, Dave and Ann Wilson, I'm Bob Lepine. We will see you back next time for another edition of *FamilyLife Today*.

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