



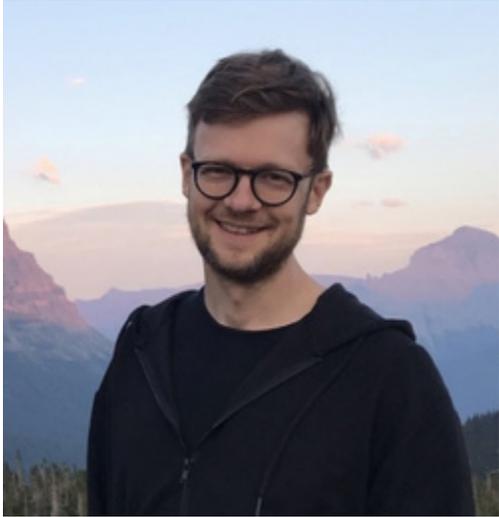
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**FIGHTING PORN WITH ACCOUNTABILITY,  
FAITH, AND FRIENDS**

# About the Author

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# **Part 1: What is Accountability?**

# The Call to Accountability

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*In this resource, I refer to many of my own accountability relationships. I have changed names and minor details to protect their privacy, but these are true stories.*

**I was a newly minted Bible school graduate and had already spent several years on the Covenant Eyes Member Care team. I was ready and equipped to help—especially with porn.**

Then the cry for help came unexpectedly from my friend David.

“I... I wanted to talk to you about something... I’ve been struggling with porn.”

My heart broke for him, but I was also excited. *This is what I’m here for—this is my calling!*

At first, I confidently offered encouragement, prayer, and Scripture. But over time, David kept struggling. My practiced answers and ready-made solutions were like flickering candles in the face of overwhelming darkness.

As more of David’s story came out, I found his porn use was fueled by deep loneliness and depression. David was buried in isolation, spending most of his time locked away in a small bedroom, rarely coming out to see the light of day.

He lived in a slimy pit of despair, and I was supposed to get him out.

The more I listened to David’s cries for help, the less confident I became, and the less confident he became that I actually had anything to offer him.

There was nothing I could tell him he hadn't already heard a dozen times. I didn't have any better answers.

In the end, while I made a lot of fuss about caring for him and wanting to help, I left David where he was: trapped in the stinking hole of porn addiction.

I wanted to save David from porn, but there was nothing I could do. I was afraid if I spent too much time in the pit with him, I'd get all slimy myself. I'd be down there in the muck and mire and wouldn't be able to save him. The call to accountability is the call to be a friend to someone stuck in the slimy pit.

Maybe you want to be held accountable, but you're afraid to ask someone for help. Maybe you've reached out to people who were just as clueless as I was. Maybe they were unkind and hurtful. That's OK. I understand accountability can be challenging.

But accountability isn't a hopeless task. Far from it! It doesn't require any special skills or advanced degrees to do it well. It simply requires a loving heart, a desire to learn, and patience.

In this resource, I've looked back at some of my past accountability relationships and have outlined the mistakes I made. I've drawn on the wisdom of many experts in the field to show the path forward.

# Biblical Accountability Defined

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**What exactly do we mean by accountability? Put another way, what did Christians do before accountability groups started popping up in churches and college ministries?**

At its most basic, accountability is helping someone in a slimy pit. It's asking for help when you're in the slimy pit. When I first started trying to have accountability relationships, I lacked a clear idea of what this should look like.

One commenter on the Covenant Eyes blog objected to the way the term "accountability" is thrown around in Christian circles:

*Accountability never used to be this confusing. It always meant simply a system of checks and balances that prevents a person in a position of responsibility from abusing that responsibility by assuring negative consequences for bad behavior. Action. Reaction. That's how the word was always meant and still always means in every other context.'*

This is too narrow of an understanding, but I can appreciate the frustration! We need to define our terms. The way people talk about "accountability" is often unclear and unhelpful.

So, I want to define *biblical accountability*. Although the word "accountability" isn't found in the Bible, there are clear biblical principles that go together to form our idea of accountability relationships.

***Biblical accountability means giving an account according to the clear standard of God's Word in the context of a personal relationship.***

Let's break down the three parts of this definition.

## **Giving an Account**

The most obvious part of accountability is "giving an account."

We all give accounts regularly. I give an account to the IRS of how much money I make. The meter outside my house automatically gives an account of how much electricity I use. My boss asks for an account of my project status.

Sociologists have called accountability "the adhesive that binds social systems together." <sup>ii</sup> Without some form of accountability, things devolve into chaos.

The Bible is concerned with social order too. But it's more concerned with the accounts we'll be required to give to God:

✎ *"So then each of us will give an account of himself to God" (Romans 14:12).*

✎ *"But I tell you that men will give an account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken" (Matthew 12:36).*

✎ *"No creature is hidden from him, but all things are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give an account" (Hebrews 4:13).*

God already knows and sees everything. He doesn't have to catch us in the act or stumble on our browser history. We're accountable for everything we think, say, or do.

It's this reality of standing before God that should motivate Christians to seek accountability here and now.

You might fool the IRS and you might hide a secret porn habit. But one day, each one of us will stand before God and give an account. God's Word tells us we're accountable because there's a perfect and holy God who holds everyone accountable for everything.

### **Another Kind of Account**

The threat of judgment can help you make good decisions and avoid harmful behaviors. Any sin, no matter how good it looks in the moment, looks pretty bad in the light of eternal consequences. Often, consequences catch up with us long before the final judgment. Many of the bad decisions we make have short-term negative effects too.

If you struggle with porn, it damages your relationships with God, family, and friends. It can make you feel ashamed. Even among those who don't see a moral problem with it, many are struggling with sexual dysfunctions as a result of too much porn.<sup>iii</sup>

But here's the irrational and ridiculous truth: *people give in to temptation despite the consequences.*

After destroying his marriage with porn, one man wrote, "For most people, this would have been enough of a wake-up call to consider getting help. I did consider it... but continued to look at pornography, digging in deeper." His obsession grew more twisted and extreme. This man eventually wound up in prison for illegal pornography.<sup>iv</sup> He knew the consequences and kept looking anyway.

This is nothing new. It's not limited to sexual sins either. People have been persisting in destructive behaviors since the Garden of Eden. We dig deeper to mask our shame.

You know the story. God put Adam and Eve in the garden with only one accountability consequence: don't eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, or you will die. There was no good reason to eat it either. God made sure the garden was well-stocked with everything they could possibly want.

But—spoiler alert—Adam and Eve ate the fruit anyway. When God called on them to give an account, they first tried to hide what they'd done. When they realized they couldn't hide from God or lie about what they'd done, they both tried shifting the blame.

People have been eating forbidden fruit, hiding, lying, and blame-shifting ever since. Despite their accountability to God, the fruit looks too good to stop. Even though they're making themselves sick on it, they turn back again and again.

In chapter 6, we'll go into that in a bit more detail when we talk about the reasons people find porn so enticing and even addictive.

But this is where a second kind of giving account comes in. When you realize that you are helpless to overcome temptation yourself—when you've tried and failed to stay away from the forbidden fruit—you voluntarily give an account of your sin and your need for help to someone who listens *without* holding the threat of consequence over you.

In other words, you need a trustworthy friend and ally. This is what happens when you confess your sins to God and ask Jesus to save you from your sins. You're not just asking for forgiveness; you're asking God to change his relationship with you from judge to friend.

In his book, *Made for Friendship*, Drew Hunter says:

*No one is born into fellowship with Jesus. We have all acted like faithless— worse than faithless, treacherous—friends. James says, "Whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:4). We each lean away from, not toward, God's friendship. Yet the Father sent his Son to welcome sinners. He sent him not to condemn but to befriend anyone who will have him (John 3:17).<sup>v</sup>*

1 John 2:1 explains the depth of this friendship with Jesus: "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate (ally) before the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One."

Jesus is the only ally who makes it possible for us to give an account to God without fear of condemnation. It is only when Jesus allies Himself with you that you are freed from sin and condemnation.

Jesus's alliance with us is what frees us from fear of judgment so we can be open to others about our weakness. It serves as the model for us in our ally relationships with other believers.

## According to God's Word

Now let's look at our next part of our definition of "accountability"—the standard or measurement for the accounts that we give.

Google "accountability," and you'll find advice on how accountability can get you in shape, make you wealthy, and motivate you to accomplish all your goals. That's all great, but the Bible plainly emphasizes that real accountability isn't based on our personal goals. It's based on the clear standard of God's law found in the Bible.

Romans 2:12 explains that people are held accountable to God's law to whatever extent they understand it. "All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law." In other words, the more you know, the greater your level of accountability.

The bottom line is that everyone is accountable to God's rule for living. If we neglect the clear standard of God's Word, accountability for porn (and anything else!) starts to get fuzzy.

After many years of helping people with accountability, I've found that many want to be accountable, but only on their own terms.

✎ *"Yes, please ask me whether I've looked at porn, but don't talk to me about the way I prioritize my time."*

✎ *"I want to stop looking at hardcore porn, but I'm not worried about these harmless sexual fantasies."*

✎ *"Is that really even porn?"*

Biblical accountability means accepting God's terms and being accountable according to His Word.

For example, porn itself can be difficult to define. Talking with Covenant Eyes members for many years, I've heard many different ideas of what porn is—is it naked people having sex? Is it nudity of any kind? Is it women in bathing suits? Is it men in bathing suits? Judge Potter Stewart said he couldn't define porn, "But I know it when I see it."<sup>vi</sup>

Jesus tells us that pornography is more about the disposition of the heart than any specific characteristics of an image. "But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28).

God's Word makes it clear what it means to be accountable for porn: we are accountable for every lustful thought and intention.

***The standard, then, is about what's going on in our hearts, not some arbitrary set of rules about how much skin is showing.***

When Nate Larkin was caught visiting an adult bookstore, his pastor decided Nate needed accountability. So, Nate dutifully met with his partner Dennis every week. "When Dennis asked how I was doing, I said 'fine' and quickly added that I had not visited any adult bookstores. He told me to keep it up,"<sup>vii</sup> says Nate. What he didn't tell Dennis was that while he'd avoided the bookstores, he'd been viewing porn online.

Nate used legalistic rationalizing to justify a lie. But any standard we try to come up with on our own will go off track. Jesus's teaching makes it plain that legalistic standards can never get to the heart of obedience to God. They can only succeed in making self-righteous Pharisees or defeated sinners.

This is why former Covenant Eyes author Luke Gilkerson said, "Accountability is not primarily others calling you out on your sin, but others calling you up to the person you are in Christ."<sup>viii</sup>

The standard of God's Word means that accountability is not just about daily turning from particular images or videos. It's about daily turning to God as the source of strength and satisfaction.

## In a Personal Relationship

The definition of accountability we're using is "giving an account, according to the clear standard of God's Word, in the context of a personal relationship." We've looked at the account itself, the biblical standard for assessing that account, and we're now at the third and last part: a personal relationship.

When the Bible talks about giving an account, it's never impersonal or detached from a relationship. Biblical examples of accountability are *always personal*.

As we saw in Romans 14:12, each person will "give an account of *himself to God*." It's not just an account of your actions; it's an account of who you are as a person to another person. When we break God's law, it's not like cheating the IRS; it's more like cheating a friend or neighbor.

In the same way, whenever the Bible describes accountability in our relationships with one another, it's personal—whether it's accountability to God, family, or neighbors.

Different relationships mean different kinds of accountability. But the relationship component is what makes biblical accountability so powerful. It's also what makes accountability frightening (more on that in the next chapter).

### Relationship Contexts for Accountability

So, where do you go to find accountability relationships?

The Bible is clear that we should seek out accountability with those who share our values and love for God. 2 Corinthians 6:14 says, "Do not be unequally yoked." While the passage is often quoted to warn about romantic relationships between Christians and non-Christians, the original context has more to do with the people you look to for accountability in ministry.

Unfortunately, few Christians today are comfortable seeking out accountability in the church. James Reeves is a pastor and author of the book *Refuge*, in which he challenges churches to function like hospitals for the spiritually broken.

He says:

*One of the saddest statements I have ever heard from Christians in recovery outside of their church is, "I have a deeper level of transparency and honesty with the unbelievers in my recovery group outside of my church than I could ever have with people in my church." ix*

Non-Christians and Christians *can* hold each other accountable if their goal is only to stop looking at porn. But biblical accountability is about more than porn. We've seen it's more than a list of do's and don'ts. *It's about calling one another up to your identity in Christ.*

What should this look like? Matthew 18:15 says, "If your brother sins against you, go tell him his fault, between you and him alone." The passage goes on to say that if the brother refuses to listen, you can involve more people in the process. It starts with the closest personal relationship and moves outward to involve others.

This informs the way we should approach accountability relationships. Biblical accountability first means admitting fault to the people most affected by our sin. This usually means accepting the consequences of our actions. When a husband or wife looks at porn, this means confessing to their spouse is an essential part of being accountable.

However, just as the offended brother from Matthew 18:15 sometimes needs to involve another person to resolve the conflict, so too someone struggling with porn who has confessed to their spouse should bring in additional help.

So, where do you go for additional help? The Bible gives wonderful examples of what these relationships can look like:

- ✦ Galatians 2:11-14 gives an example of accountability among peers. Paul says he called out the hypocrisy of Peter and Barnabas when they bowed to peer pressure.
- ✦ Titus 2:1-5 says that older men and women in the church should model good behavior for younger men and women and keep them accountable for godly living.

✨ In Exodus 17:8-16, Moses must hold his staff overhead for the Israelites to be victorious over their enemies, but he finds he's not strong enough to do it alone. He needs the support of Aaron and Hur to stay the course. This is an incredible picture of accountability!

Age and social demographic are not as important as a shared commitment to follow Jesus. A personal relationship with someone who shares this commitment is where you find a real partner and ally.

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Describe the two kinds of accountability discussed in this chapter (consequence-based accountability and friendship-based accountability). According to the chapter, why do we need the second kind?
2. Why is it important to have the standard of God's Word? What happens without it?
3. Look at the examples from Galatians 2:11-14, Titus 2:1-5, and Exodus 17:8-16. Why does biblical accountability happen in the context of personal relationships?

# What Allies Are

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**Now that we have a good definition of biblical accountability, let's dig deeper into the "who" of accountability—specifically the idea of accountability partners or "allies." An ally is someone who builds a relationship to help someone caught in the slimy pit of isolation.**

Loneliness is a powerful force. Despite our connectivity, people today are lonelier than ever. Writing early in the 2020 pandemic, one author worried:

*This current period of social isolation will also exacerbate the epidemic of loneliness identified by a 2019 University of Michigan study on healthy aging in which 34% of adults aged 50 to 80 years reported feeling lonely. Among the increasing number of households of adults living alone—now 42% of US adults—60% reported feeling a lack of companionship and 41% felt isolated. Notably, 28% of people who reported feeling lonely ranked their health as either fair or poor in contrast to the 13% who rarely felt socially isolated. <sup>x</sup>*

We'll talk more about triggers later, but for anyone struggling with porn, loneliness and social isolation are a disaster. Porn may seem like an attractive solution for a lonely person. But when someone keeps their porn a secret, shame and anxiety can drive them into deeper loneliness.

We need friends to come alongside us and encourage us in the fight. That's because we're social creatures. These relationships are an essential part of what it means to be human.

Remember my friend David from the beginning of this book? David's biggest problem was that he was isolated, lonely, and had few friends that he really trusted. He didn't need my advice to fix his problem. He mostly needed authentic fellowship and encouragement.

The Bible doesn't tell you exactly who to invite into your life as a close ally. But it speaks frequently about the kinds of relationships that are most profitable in pointing you to God.

## Partners in Seeking the Good

Ancient philosophers believed that deep friendships were essential for a well-lived life. Aristotle said that the highest level of friendship is to seek the good of someone for their own sake.<sup>xi</sup> These friends are partners in seeking the good. And they are not only a source of great joy but a key component to a fulfilled life.

Accountability partners are those rare friends who seek another's good by trying to understand their struggles, challenging them to aspire to greater things, and offering encouragement when they fail.

The Bible emphasizes friendship as well, particularly deep friendship that is built on honesty and truth-speaking:

- ✎ Hebrews 3:13: "But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."
- ✎ Proverbs 17:17: "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity."
- ✎ Proverbs 27:25-26: "Better an open rebuke than love that is concealed. The wounds of a friend are faithful, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful."

Together, these verses give a picture of encouraging relationships built on love that do not shy away from speaking hard truth when necessary. They call for what pastor James Reeves describes as "toe-curling honesty."<sup>xii</sup> They're a powerful catalyst for spiritual growth even in difficult times.

Because biblical accountability is so much more than merely giving an account, many people reject the label altogether. When Nate Larkin finally got serious about quitting porn (and other sexual behaviors), his sponsor told him:

*You need to understand that you and I are not in an accountability relationship. We are not doing sin management here. I am not the sex police. I am your friend, and as your friend, I am telling you that you are far sicker than you realize.<sup>xiii</sup>*

Most of us don't need more police in our lives—we need better friendships. We need friends like Nate's sponsor, who are willing to tell us the truth and point us in the right direction. The early Christian preacher John Chrysostom said, "Nothing is so injurious to mankind as to undervalue friendship and not to cultivate it with the greatest care; as nothing, on the other hand, is so beneficial, as to pursue it to the utmost of our power."<sup>xiv</sup>

But it goes deeper.

## Partners in the Faith

For Christians, accountability is rooted in more than our shared desire for something good—although it certainly includes that! Accountability is rooted in our connection to Christ as believers. We are partners in the same faith.

This is what Paul says about the Philippians, "In every prayer for all of you, I always pray with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" (Philippians 1:4-5).

What does it mean to be partners in the gospel? For Paul, it meant sharing the joys and sorrows of ministry. It also meant holding fellow believers accountable when they strayed from the gospel.

You can see many examples of this in Paul's letters. One of the most interesting is in Galatians 2 when Paul describes an encounter he had with his fellow apostle, Peter. Peter and a particular group of Christians had formed a clique that excluded other believers.

Paul says he "saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel," and so

he held Peter accountable by confronting him. Paul wasn't just calling Peter out for his sin. He was reminding Peter of their partnership in the faith. The message they both affirmed was for everyone, whether Jewish or not. Paul was keeping Peter accountable to the gospel.

Christian accountability isn't ultimately about arbitrary goals, whether for health, productivity, or even quitting porn. Those things are important. But ultimately, Christian accountability is about keeping one another accountable to the gospel.

Christians are partners in a shared faith.

## Partners in All of Life

There's a myth about accountability that it's something like a round of antibiotics.

*"I just need to get a few weeks of accountability, and I'll be able to quit porn."*

*"Accountability is such a burden—I can't wait to quit porn so I can be done with it!"*

This superficial approach is only a band-aid, and it usually fails. The best accountability partnerships are not limited to modifying a particular behavior; they are deep and authentic friendships that touch all areas of life.

They bring to light the hidden struggles, hopes, and fears. They're an antidote to loneliness and isolation. I'm reminded of an observation from the 17th-century politician and philosopher Francis Bacon: "Nothing opens the heart, but a true friend; to whom you may impart griefs, joys, fears, hopes, suspicions, counsels, and whatever lies upon the heart to oppress it." <sup>xv</sup>

Opening the heart idea is key—accountability means inviting someone into the dark and secret corners of your life. It's a friend who speaks to your "griefs, joys, fears, hopes, suspicions, counsels, and whatever lies upon the heart."

Scripture also describes a deep-level friendship that's supportive and upbuilding in the face of difficulty. Proverbs 27:9 says, "Oil and incense bring joy to the heart, and the sweetness of a friend is better than self-counsel."

Friendships aren't a substitute for professional counseling or therapy. Counseling from a qualified professional is extremely valuable—especially when dealing with trauma or deep-rooted emotional and behavioral problems. But the opposite is true as well: a therapist is no substitute for real friendships. Pastor James Reeves says, “Counseling is an artificial, professional relationship. You see a counselor for perhaps an hour per week, you are paying for that hour, and the counselor knows only what you tell him or her.”<sup>xvi</sup>

Paul modeled this kind of friendship to the churches that he wrote to in many of his letters. 1 Thessalonians 2:8 says, “So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.”

Notice the last part—Paul shared his own self with the Thessalonians. A true accountability partner or ally is not someone who is relegated to a particular corner of your life. The best accountability relationships are integrated with all of life. Biblical counselor Ed Welch comments:

*In our era, we consult experts, professionals, and specialists, but when you look at your own history of having been helped, it's likely that you'll notice very few experts among those who have helped you. Who were your helpers? Were they professional counselors or specialists? Probably not. Most often, they were friends—the regular, everyday people in your life. Friends are the best helpers. They come prepackaged with compassion and love. All they need is wisdom, and that is available to everyone.*<sup>xvii</sup>

This flies in the face of how we tend to approach friendships. I like to imagine my friends are carefree, happy-go-lucky people whose deepest anxieties are for their favorite football teams. Frankly, I like to imagine myself that way too. If I'm not careful, I start to play a role instead of sharing myself.

But this isn't reality. Often the carefree and happy-go-lucky image covers a soul that is trapped in the slimy pit of despair. And even though superficial relationships are fun and easy, they aren't as satisfying or enduring as the real friendships forged in the fires of accountability.

In his final exhortations, Jesus himself called his disciples “friends” (John 15:15). If Jesus himself could reach into our isolation and despair and call us friends, how much more are we called to be friends to one another?

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Did this chapter change your thinking about the role of an ally or accountability partner? If so, how?
2. Why is it important for accountability partnerships to infiltrate all areas of life? Why can this be difficult?
3. Read John 15:12-17. How does this passage challenge you to think differently about your current friendships?

# Preparing for Accountability

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Whether you're someone looking for help to quit porn or an ally preparing to come alongside someone else in the fight, accountability can be intimidating. It's scary to make yourself vulnerable to another person. It can feel overwhelming when someone turns to you for help.

Here are three key steps to prepare yourself for accountability.

## Trust Christ First

When we trust Christ, it means we're no longer trusting ourselves or the image of ourselves that we want people to see. That takes humility. Pastor James Reeves shares his life-changing realization about trusting Christ:

*I was still trying to get through it in my own power without humbling myself to others. Sometimes our reaching out to God is not faith but an expression of our pride. We don't want to humble ourselves before others, so we try to do it in secret, just between God and me. <sup>xviii</sup>*

Reeves realized that true faith in Christ meant humbling himself before others and reaching out for help.

Pride is only part of it. We noted earlier that friendship with Christ is the model that we follow for accountability relationships. It's this friendship that frees Christians to

open up with one another about their struggles without fearing judgment. “There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

Jesus also takes away guilt and shame. When we’re connected to Jesus, we can be ourselves without hiding. Even though there’s the risk of being judged by other Christians, this doesn’t shake our standing with Jesus. Paul said this in 1 Corinthians 4:3, “But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself.”

Finding friends to trust is tough. Even the best accountability partners are deeply flawed humans. But we can have the confidence to pursue these relationships because of the one Friend who will never leave you or forsake you (Hebrews 13:5), the Friend who sticks closer than a brother (Proverbs 18:24).

## Trust the Truth

For someone to voluntarily seek accountability, they must get to the point where they believe the truth is better than continuing in a fantasy. To have a meaningful accountability relationship, this mindset must be continually reinforced.

Nate Larkin speaks on this from experience: “Every addict perfects the ability to construct a convincing lie. The key, we soon learn, is to spin a plausible narrative and persuade ourselves to believe it. After we have lied to ourselves successfully, our efforts to persuade others carry the power of sincerity.”

Nate was a successful church leader, husband, and father. He had created a façade around his life that masked a deep bondage to sexual sin. He didn’t reach the point of trusting the truth until after his sin was exposed.

He says, “It was the worst day and the best day when my wife caught me. It felt like the end of the world.”<sup>xix</sup> Getting caught turned out to be the turning point for Nate. Once the light of truth shined into his secret life, it eventually lost its grip on him. The truth set him free (John 8:32).

Like Nate, some people only seek accountability after their secret life is exposed. Others come to this realization before getting caught.

Amy Riordan tells her story as a married Christian woman trapped by porn. When she realized living a lie was worse than coming clean, she decided to admit her struggles to her husband:

*Yes, I finally took that step of boldness, but I didn't do it by myself. I believed and had to trust that the Holy Spirit was going to be there with me when I confessed this secret to my husband. I didn't have the strength by myself to confess this to him, but I found the strength when I leaned on the Holy Spirit to help me. He was prompting me to tell my husband, so I knew He would be the one to give me the strength to do it. <sup>xx</sup>*

The Holy Spirit showed Amy that walking in the light would be better than living a lie (1 John 1:7) and that He would give her the strength to tell the truth.

Whether you're seeking accountability for yourself or trying to help someone else, accountability means living in *reality*. It means looking hard truths square in the face trusting that God can work them out for good (Romans 8:28).

Accountability means committing to truth and trusting that the truth will set you free.

## Take the Risk

Understandably, a lot of people are hesitant to open up about their deepest secrets. There's risk involved.

For many, taking the risk of seeking accountability seems to outweigh any possible reward. This is especially the case with something like porn—our sexual sins are closely tied to our identities and make us extremely vulnerable.

It would be unrealistic—and dishonest—to pretend that telling someone about a porn problem is easy. Everyone knows it's difficult. There's a risk of embarrassment, humiliation, and rejection.

But the fact is, we're social beings, and we long to be known and loved. Pastor Tim Keller explains the importance of both "being known" and "being loved."

*To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything. It liberates us from pretense, humbles us out of our self-righteousness, and fortifies us for any difficulty life can throw at us. <sup>xxi</sup>*

So, while the risk of seeking accountability is real, the reality of *not* seeking accountability is real. It goes beyond remaining stuck in habits like porn. If you don't have accountability, it means *nobody truly knows you*. And if no one knows you, no one can love you for who you are.

The benefit of seeking accountability outweighs the risk of never being known and loved.

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Why do you think it's so difficult for many people to find accountability?
2. Do you have people in your life that you can share your struggles with? What relationships have had the most profound impact on your life?
3. Does the risk of making yourself vulnerable seem scary? Why does the chapter say it's worth the risk?

# Accountability, Myths, and Reality Checks

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**Most of the Christians I know have at least heard that accountability is important for quitting porn. But there's a lot of confusion—I was certainly confused about helping my friend David!**

If this is your first time holding someone accountable, you may need some more details on what it involves. If you've had accountability relationships in the past that failed, you may wonder if you did something wrong or if accountability is really the answer for everyone's struggles.

I want to address three myths about accountability.

## Myth 1: "Accountability Doesn't Work"

*"I tried it and it didn't help."*

*"What's the point? You can just lie about what you're doing."*

*"You don't need accountability; you just need to love God more."*

Maybe you've had an unhelpful or even painful experience with accountability that makes you hesitant to try it again. That's understandable. Simply having a system in place you call "accountability" isn't a magical formula for success.

It's true that not all accountability is helpful. In chapter 7, we'll look at some of the specific reasons accountability fails—which it does a lot. But this doesn't mean accountability doesn't work. It just means it's often misapplied.

It's also true that some people lie and look at porn anyway. But this is usually because the relationship is poorly equipped for accountability. When paired with effective reporting, such as the Covenant Eyes software, the temptation to lie can be greatly reduced or eliminated. We'll also see in chapter 7 how certain types of accountability relationships motivate dishonesty.

Properly understood, it *does work*. And it's necessary. Christian counselor and sex addiction expert Dr. Mark Laaser said, "To achieve true change, a person must be accountable to others to make that change."<sup>xxii</sup> Other experts agree. Dr. Doug Weiss says that telling another person about your problem and having a friend to keep you on track are essential.<sup>xxiii</sup>

In his research into unwanted sexual behaviors, counselor Jay Stringer found that people who talked to someone when they were struggling looked at porn 22% less than those who did not.<sup>xxiv</sup> Accountability doesn't automatically fix the problem, but it's nonetheless a critical part of recovery, especially for those deeply entrenched in habitual porn use.

Most importantly, accountability is part of God's design. We don't overcome porn by "just loving God more" if we're thinking of love primarily as a feeling. We love God more by doing what He says. This includes using the tools he's given to overcome sin. Accountability is one of those tools, and we're commanded repeatedly to utilize it. "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you might be healed" (James 5:16). "Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."

Given its role, you would expect practicing accountability to have a lasting effect on someone's habits and outlook. Sure enough, the Barna Group found that families that sought accountability using Covenant Eyes for more than five years seek out pornography less often and are more discriminating about the content they deem appropriate.<sup>xxv</sup>

God doesn't call us to fight temptation in isolation. He calls us to live out our faith as members of Jesus's body. This idea is found not only in the biblical calls to accountability, but also the biblical teaching on the inter-connectedness of believers. "If one member suffers, all suffer together" (1 Corinthians 12:26).

At Covenant Eyes, we speak with people every day who affirm the importance of accountability. More than one million people have used Covenant Eyes and the power of accountability on their journey to quit porn.

Yes, accountability works!

## **Myth 2: “Accountability Saves People”**

Accountability works, but only Jesus saves. When you decide to help someone by holding them accountable, there’s a temptation to get a savior complex. If you’re the person seeking accountability, it’s tempting to think your ally is supposed to deliver you from porn. That’s not how it works. Accountability relationships formed with this pretense will always fail.

I told my story about my friend David and my attempts to help him quit porn. Part of my problem was the myth that I could save him by keeping him accountable. I knew I wasn’t Jesus. But I still thought my Bible school diploma and a few years working at Covenant Eyes gave me all the tools I needed to save my friend from porn.

I was so wrong. I was pointing David to my own wisdom and experience instead of Jesus. That’s a recipe for disaster. I didn’t have all the answers that he needed for his situation. As it turns out, answers from me weren’t even what he needed. Allies are there as helpers and friends, not saviors.

Even if you’ve had your own struggles and victories with porn, don’t assume that you’re an expert on your friend’s recovery. Don’t assume that the things that worked for you are going to work for them. Don’t be like me and assume that your keen biblical insights and brilliant advice are going to fix their problems. Remember what I forgot: you’re not the savior—Jesus is.

Here’s a secret: the power of accountability isn’t in the person who holds you accountable. It’s in God’s design for the relationship itself and how that relationship shapes a person’s response to various circumstances. Being an ally is humbling because your role is much less impressive than “Savior.” You’re not here to be the hero. You’re simply a friend, comrade, and brother or sister in Christ.

This should be freeing when you think about being an ally for someone who wants to quit porn! You can't save them from porn, and you don't need to.

### **Myth 3: "Accountability Controls Behavior"**

There was another accountability myth I bought: I thought accountability could control David's behavior. Too often, accountability is seen as a substitute for personal responsibility.

Therapist and porn recovery expert Dr. Peter Kleponis says, "The addicted person is fully responsible for his/her own sobriety and recovery. The ally is simply a caring individual there to help the addicted person stay on track." <sup>xxvi</sup>

In practical terms, this means I couldn't quit porn for David, no matter how much I cared about him as a friend and ally. I thought my compassion and insight should be enough, but they fell short because there were some really obvious steps that David wasn't yet ready to take.

Many people step into the accountability role to control the person's behavior. Often this is understandable. If your spouse is looking at porn, you may feel that keeping them accountable is the only way to hold the relationship together!

I've spoken to many spouses of porn users who have signed up for Covenant Eyes as a last-ditch effort to save their marriage. And here's the sad truth: when used this way, Covenant Eyes is often the last nail in the coffin.

The power of accountability to help someone in the slimy pit is not the power to control someone's actions.

### **Reality Check 1: The Slimy Pit**

With my friend David, I had to face the reality check of what accountability was really about. I could save or control him, but his call for help was a call to climb into the pit *with* him.

What did this mean? It meant I had to be willing to step into the messiness of David's life and the messiness of his struggles. I needed to speak the truth to him, yes. But I also needed to just *be there with him*, to love him and care about him.

You're not the savior. You can't control their behavior. But you must be willing to get down in the slimy pit of buried feelings and hidden motivations to point them to salvation in Jesus—in your words and your actions.

Why?

The Bible teaches that it's our job as Christians to be a friend to the person caught up in sin. Galatians 6:1-2 makes it clear:

*Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.*

Paul says that restoring someone caught in sin is "the law of Christ." Laws aren't optional—this is part of our calling!

If you are filled with the love of Christ, that love is going to spill over into the lives of those around you and motivate you to help those in need and those struggling with sin. It isn't optional.

It may seem like a fearful thing to step into the trenches with someone in the fight against porn, but this is part of the noble call of God's people. It's our identity: we should bear one another's burdens.

## **Reality Check 2: Gentleness Required**

As we'll see in chapter 6, struggles with porn are often connected to deep-rooted shame and identity issues. Many Christians are afraid to reach out for the help they need because they're afraid of being shamed or berated for their sin.

This should not be.

Go back to Galatians 6 for a moment. Paul tells us that when someone is caught in sin, we should restore them in “a spirit of gentleness.” This means we should be merciful and compassionate toward people who are struggling with porn.

Gentleness does not mean you simply pat someone on the back and tell them it’s going to be OK! The more someone plays with fire, the more urgent your response should be. However, there is no place for shaming someone or responding harshly to someone who confesses their sin.

Why is that?

Jesus himself does not respond harshly when we confess our sin to him. Romans 5:8 says, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” 1 John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sin, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sin.”

Being gentle can be difficult, especially when we see obvious contradictions, inconsistencies, and self-destructive patterns in a person’s behavior.

But Christians are called to gentleness.

## Reality Check 3: Taking Care

In Galatians 6:4, Paul further warns us to “Keep watch over yourself, lest you too be tempted.” What does it mean to “keep watch” or to “take care” as we keep people accountable?

There are at least three things.

### **Take Care by Recognizing Your Vulnerability**

Even if you’ve never struggled with porn yourself, it’s a good idea that you have some kind of accountability in place for yourself.

*Why is that? I’m not the one with the problem.*

Not everyone is tempted by porn and lust, but everyone is tempted by *something*. Since we are all vulnerable to various forms of temptation, we should all have accountability

structures in place to help us stay on track—to keep ourselves out of the shadows of sin and walking in the light of truth.

1 John 1:7-8 says, “But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”

John says that fellowship is intertwined with acknowledging sin and walking in the light—that’s what accountability is all about.

Recognize your vulnerability and seek accountability for yourself, even as you reach out to help others.

### **Take Care by Modeling Accountability**

This goes with the previous point: if you’re going to keep others accountable (and you should!), then you should model for them what being accountable looks like. This is true for individuals, church leaders, and parents.

In his letters to the early Christian churches, the Apostle Paul repeatedly encourages them to “imitate him” (1 Corinthians 4:6, 11:1, and Philipians 3:17). Paul makes it clear that he wants them to imitate him like he imitates Jesus. He sets the example for them to follow.

The Scottish preacher Robert Murray M’Cheyne is credited with the quote, “My people’s greatest need is my own holiness.” M’Cheyne recognized that people paid more attention to his actions than his words. He needed to model the Christian life for his people.

James 2:14 asks, “What good is it if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds?” You can talk the talk about accountability, but if you’re not putting it into practice yourself, it doesn’t mean much. It’s a powerful teaching tool to say, “I too am vulnerable and need help in my Christian walk. Follow my example.”

## **Take Care by Avoiding Presumption**

When I was about ten, I loved going sledding in the winter with my brothers. Our “sledding hill” was just a small ditch by the side of a remote country road. One day as we were sledding, I discovered a newfound joy: instructing my little brother on proper sledding technique.

“You need to put your feet like this. Now lean forward. Use your arms!”

Never mind I had no better idea of the “right” way to sled down a short ditch than he did. I felt like a coach at the Winter Olympics.

“Here’s the most important technique to remember when sledding,” I began. I had no idea, but I had learned the foolish joy of presuming to be a teacher.

This silly story comes to mind when I think about accountability and the tendency that many of us—myself included—have to dispense unqualified advice. James 3:1 says, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”

James’s caution is against people who too eagerly take on the role of the wise sage dispensing advice. Paul mentions people like this in 1 Timothy 1:7, “They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not understand what they are saying or that which they so confidently assert.”

The role of the accountability partner or ally does not mean that you’re a wise teacher or advisor. As we’ll see later when we get into the specifics of accountability, one of your primary roles is to simply listen. Be circumspect about what you say.

Accountability is about stepping into the slimy pit to help, recognizing your own weakness and limitations, and doing this with an attitude of gentleness and compassion.

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Have you ever been in an accountability relationship? Which parts of the “cry from the pit” could you relate to? Which parts were different from your experience?
2. Which of the myths about accountability sounds the most believable to you? Which is the least believable? Why?
3. Read Galatians 6:1-3. Which accountability reality check is the toughest to accept? Which is already part of your thinking about accountability?

# **Part 2: Practicing Accountability**

# Why Porn Is So Tough to Quit

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Christians who haven't struggled with porn often can't understand why quitting can be so difficult. If you know porn is bad and you love Jesus, why can't you just say no?

Many struggling with porn are asking the exact same question: *Why hasn't God answered my prayer and set me free for this sin I hate?*

This lack of understanding has led many tempted Christians to feel alone and abandoned. In Psalm 31:10-11, David mourns this sense of abandonment while struggling with sin:

*For my life is spent with sorrow,  
and my years with sighing;  
my strength fails because of my iniquity,  
and my bones waste away.  
Because of all my adversaries I have become a reproach,  
especially to my neighbors,  
and an object of dread to my acquaintances;  
those who see me in the street flee from me.*

A true friend and ally won't reject the person trying to quit porn. They won't view them as a reproach or an object of dread! Allies sympathize with weakness.

All sin is messy, but sexual sins like porn can make spectacular messes. The Apostle Paul noted this in 1 Corinthians 6:18: “Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body.”

Paul already knew through the Holy Spirit what neuroscientists are just discovering through research: sexual sin can affect our bodies as much as it affects our souls. Ever since the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve’s descendants have wrapped their sins in layers of shame, secrecy, and lies. When you dig down deep and start to explore deep emotional wounds that drive a person to porn, the messiness can feel overwhelming!

Whether you’re looking to quit porn yourself or just trying to help a friend, understanding the pull of porn will better equip you for accountability.

It will also help you recognize when you need to seek more qualified help. If you feel you’re in over your head, don’t hesitate to look for counseling or to refer your ally to a qualified counselor!

## Porn Affects the Whole Person

What is really going on with porn? When we take a closer look, we find that porn is a sin that involves the whole person. This is why accountability relationships need to involve more than checking off a list of simple questions about porn.

### Porn Affects the Mind

In *The Porn Circuit*, Sam Black writes about the “neuro-cocktail” of chemicals in the brain that are released when a person views porn. But here’s a short summary of the chemicals at work:

- ⚡ **Dopamine** is a chemical that sharpens your focus and gives a sense of craving. It creates the “gotta-have-it” sensation.”
- ⚡ **Norepinephrine** creates alertness and focus. It is the brain’s version of adrenaline. It tells the brain, “Something is about to happen, and we need to get ready for it.”

- ⚡ **Oxytocin** and **vasopressin** help to lay down the long-term memories for the cells. They “bind” a person’s memories to the object that gave him or her the sexual pleasure.
- ⚡ **Endorphins** are natural opiates that create a “high”—a wave of pleasure over the whole body.
- ⚡ After sexual release, **serotonin** levels also change, bringing a sense of calm and relaxation. <sup>xxvii</sup>

That’s a lot going on in the brain, isn’t it? And all these chemicals make you feel GREAT. Together, this combination makes porn an intoxicating experience and keeps you going back for more.

Former Covenant Eyes author and speaker Luke Gilkerson summarizes:

*This system works the way it is supposed to work when you’re having sex with your spouse. Together you can experience a high, an alertness of sexual pleasure, and the deep calm afterward (norepinephrine, endorphins, and serotonin). With each sexual embrace you are emotionally bonding to this person (oxytocin and vasopressin). Over time a craving for sex is transformed into a desire for one another (dopamine). <sup>xxviii</sup>*

God designed sex to be pleasurable, and the neurological bonding that takes place is wonderful in the context of marriage! But porn hijacks the whole pleasure system. When the pleasure system is overloaded, your brain is primed for a chemical addiction—like it is with heroin or any other drug. The unnatural stimulus supercharges the brain’s natural capacity for pleasure, resulting in a craving that cannot be satisfied.

Porn reshapes the brain to want more porn regardless of the consequences. The thinking part of your brain knows that you need to do homework, but the feeling part of your brain tells you that you need porn NOW. So much for sleep. The thinking part of your brain tells you that visiting porn sites while at work will get you fired, but the feeling part of your brain tells you that porn is more important than your job. So much for your paycheck.

Romans 1 says that when people persist in sin, they are “given over to a depraved mind”—the reasonable and thinking part of the brain is bypassed. When a person gives their mind over to porn repeatedly, their thinking becomes increasingly dark and irrational. Neuroscientist Bill Struthers uses the metaphor of a well-traveled hiking trail:

*Like a path is created in the woods with each successive hiker, so do the neural paths set the course for the next time an erotic image is viewed. Over time these neural paths become wider as they are repeatedly traveled with each exposure to pornography.* <sup>xxix</sup>

Someone can understand that porn is bad and keep looking anyway. Because of the “neural paths” established in the brain, that rational knowledge is bypassed by a powerful impulsive urge in the moment of temptation.

Romans 12:2 explains that life transformation happens through the renewing of our minds. We need to establish new neural paths away from porn toward God-honoring activities.

Accountability helps renew the mind and develop new neural pathways. We’ll look in detail at mind-renewing accountability conversations in chapter 8. For a deeper exploration of how porn warps the brain and biblical steps to renew it, see our ebook *Your Brain on Porn*.

## **Porn Affects the Heart**

Some people attribute their porn usage to an over-active sex drive.

*“Porn is just a pressure-release valve when you can’t get the real thing.”*

*“My wife doesn’t like sex, so, yeah, I’m going to look at porn every now and again.”*

But if you spend enough time with someone who has repeatedly tried and failed to quit porn, something becomes evidently clear: porn is not the root problem. The roots of the problem are buried deep in the heart.

Often, bondage to porn is entangled with a host of interrelated emotional struggles. It may be a symptom of other sins—*both* those committed by the individual struggling *and* those committed against them. People turn to porn because, in the moment at least, it seems to offer *salvation* from a distressing situation. That situation may be an unmet longing for sex or companionship, frustration or discouragement, confusion, or even anger.

In one study of 1,000 sex addicts, 97% had been emotionally abused, 74% had been physically abused, and 81% had been sexually abused. <sup>xxx</sup> The abuse or trauma that someone has experienced can play a powerful role in the temptations they themselves face later in life.

In his book *Unwanted*, counselor Jay Stringer conducted research on 3,800 men and women who struggled with unwanted sexual behaviors. The majority of respondents felt disconnected from their parents, and a large percentage experienced sexual abuse as children. <sup>xxx</sup> Stringer's research also revealed that many people turn to porn as an escape from their circumstances. For porn users:

- ✎ 60% look at their lives and all they see is failure.
- ✎ 57% are unmotivated in life.
- ✎ 55% are overwhelmed.
- ✎ 47% feel more anxious than most people. <sup>xxxii</sup>

Experiencing trauma or abuse doesn't *make* someone look at porn. Neither do failure, lack of motivation, or anxiety. They don't make it impossible to overcome porn either—though it often feels that way!

However, understanding the deeper heart issues of a porn problem helps us understand why it becomes such a fixture, even when it's obviously destructive. It can help explain often irrational behavior or indicate the need to reach out for more qualified help from a counselor or therapist.

Nate Larkin's 12-step sponsor told him, "[Sex] is the medication you have been using all these years to numb the pain caused by your deeper problems—and those problems, by the way, are common to man." <sup>xxxiii</sup>

People turn to porn as because it seems to offer medication—and salvation—for hurting hearts. Overcoming porn means rejecting it as a source of salvation.

### **Porn Affects the Body**

The bodily urge to look at porn can be powerful. It takes a strong commitment to quit once the habit is there. Jesus taught that if anyone lusts, he has already committed adultery in his heart (Matthew 5:27-28). And what does Jesus say right after this? If your eye causes you to sin, *pluck it out and throw it away*.

It's hyperbolic language, of course. But we shouldn't miss the implication: lust is so difficult to overcome that it's like your eyes have a mind of their own. Just trying harder isn't going to work. You must take aggressive steps to defeat lust—to out-manuever your own body's natural inclination. As Jesus says, it may require physical intervention.

This doesn't minimize the sinner's responsibility, but it doesn't minimize the strength and stickiness of the sin either.

***The implication of Jesus's command "pluck out your eye" is that you need to know your weakness. You can only use your strength effectively when you've taken your weakness into account.***

Jesus said the greatest commandment is to love God with your whole self: heart, soul, mind, and strength. Since porn affects the whole person, we need accountability for the whole person.

## **You Have to Learn Escape Routes**

1 Corinthians 10:13 says that God provides a way of escape from temptation for believers. Nonetheless, the Bible also teaches that learning to use the available way of escape can take time. And we know from experience that we do fall back into sin—even when we know better.

My friend Kyle was a strong Christian who overcame porn completely as a young man. But he continued to struggle with sexual fantasies and masturbation. Over time,

however, he was able to find more and more freedom from these more deeply ingrained habits as well. When he learned to use the “escape routes” that God provided, he was successful.

What are “escape routes”? Escape routes are new pathways in your brain that lead you away from porn and toward some other activity or diversion. They can look different for everyone. For Kyle, the escape routes were:

- ✦ Finding social activities to keep busy when he wasn’t working.
- ✦ Getting regular exercise and avoiding foods that made him feel sluggish and unmotivated.
- ✦ Getting up a few minutes early each morning to do his devotions before work.
- ✦ Taking the initiative to let his accountability partner know when he was struggling.

Galatians 5:1 says, “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” There’s tension, though—even a contradiction. Your old sin-stained rags are thrown out and burned, and you’re dressed in the robes of righteousness. But like Kyle, we still have a strong impulse to turn back to the old slavery of sin.

In other words, God provides a way of escape, but we don’t always take it. Christians face a life-long challenge of matching up how they live with who they are. We’re free, but we don’t always live in freedom. Romans 7:17-20:

*But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.*

Paul doesn’t excuse the sin. But verse 17 shows that these impulses are out of character with who he is as a Christian. “It is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.” Somehow, Paul found himself stuck in a pattern of sinful behavior that was out of character with his real identity in Christ and with what he wanted to do most of the time.

Many porn recovery experts advocate for an intensive 90-day “detoxification” to reverse the deeply ingrained chemical patterns in the brain. The specific time required can vary, but it takes a very drawn out and consistent effort.

Galatians 6:9 says, “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.” To help people learn to develop their own escape routes, we’ve created a free resource called *Hobbies and Habits*. It gives creative and practical strategies for fighting temptation and can be used as a study tool in your accountability meetings.

The point is, it takes time to learn effective escape routes, and more time before taking these escape routes becomes habitual.

## Quitting Porn Takes Accountability

People sometimes ask, “Can’t I just do this myself? I don’t have anyone I can talk to.” I usually say “no.” Why? Because if you could quit porn on your own, you probably would have done it already.

We saw that freedom from porn requires a transformation of the whole person, and this takes time and persistent effort. A big part of accountability is simply reminding people of their commitment and encouraging them to continue the important steps toward recovery.

Paul tells the Philippians, “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, *work out your own salvation with fear and trembling* (Philippians 2:12). Notice the accountability components here: Paul is reminding his beloved friends of their relationship and their shared commitment to obeying God.

Accountability is an indispensable tool that God has provided for working out our salvation. Accountability is not an optional add-on to the Christian life, but rather something intrinsic to how we’re called to live out the faith.

Recovery mentor Dan Wobschall says, “Isolation is the devil’s playground and fertile soil for lies to grow and bear bitter fruit. Without a rational person, a godly person, to speak

into our lives, the ability to convince ourselves to dive deeper into pornography and beyond in sexual sin thrives.”<sup>xxxiv</sup>

The danger of secrecy and isolation is reflected throughout the Bible as well. Psalm 32:3-5 says:

*For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away  
through my groaning all day long.  
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;  
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.  
I acknowledged my sin to you,  
and I did not cover my iniquity;  
I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,”  
and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.*

James 5:16 explains the benefit of confessing struggles to one another: “Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.” There’s healing power in confession to break the cycle of shame and isolation and restore the relationship to God and others.

Quitting porn doesn’t happen in isolation—it takes accountability.

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. According to the chapter, what are some of the ways that porn is like any other sin struggle? What are some of the unique challenges posed by this temptation?
2. Why do you think isolation makes it so easy for sin to thrive?
3. In what sense do you think confession is healing? Have you experienced this in your own life?

# Why Accountability Fails

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**In his book *Beyond Accountability*, Nate Larkin describes a failed accountability relationship. Like many addicts, Nate was deceptive, and he would often twist the truth or lie outright. <sup>xxxv</sup>**

I wish I could say this is uncommon. I spoke with a man who had enlisted the help of his friend to quit looking at porn. After several months, he told me, “I need a new partner. Unfortunately, my friend and I aren’t on speaking terms anymore.”

If you’re like me and you’ve been in a variety of accountability relationships, you already know they’re not all equal. Like Nate, some people simply lie about what’s going on. Like the man I talked to, some people who look for accountability end up ruining existing friendships.

Imagine you go to the hard work and discomfort of starting a new fitness plan. You push yourself through the pain only to find months later that you’ve damaged your shoulders and knees. Whatever the importance of accountability, experience tells us that it doesn’t always work. And like improper exercise, sometimes it even hurts us.

There are a lot of reasons that accountability goes sour. Whether you’re looking for accountability yourself or trying to hold someone else accountable, you need to understand why accountability fails.

We can identify six basic reasons that accountability fails. <sup>xxxvi</sup> Let’s examine them in more detail.

## 1. The Accountable Person Doesn't Take Responsibility

The accountability partner is there to help, encourage, or challenge as needed, but the person being held accountable needs to take responsibility. This is particularly true if the accountability partner is there to help overcome a bad habit or addiction.

No matter how good a friend you are, you can't change someone's behavior for them. They must own it. This is essential to avoiding the pitfall of a "police and fugitive" relationship we saw earlier.

If I blame my accountability partner when I fail to meet my goals, I've missed the point of accountability. Twelve-step groups recognized long ago that blaming others for your problems guarantees your failure. Blame never solves anything. You have to own a problem before you can fix it.

This is the same principle we see at work throughout the Christian life. Romans 3:23 says, "All have sinned and all short of the glory of God." Recognizing and owning that truth is foundational to saving faith in Jesus.

***No matter how caring, wise, and well-intentioned an ally is, they cannot help someone who isn't ready to take responsibility.***

Only when the accountable person takes responsibility can the accountability relationship be effective. Having ownership in the right place sets the partnership off in the right direction.

## 2. There's a Police-Fugitive Relationship

We noted earlier that accountability can take different forms, and one of those forms is an authority figure that enforces consequences for actions. A police officer is an example of this kind of accountability. There's a place for this, but it isn't what accountability partners are about. Accountability partners are allies, friends who step in when the threat of consequences has already failed to make a difference.

When allies act as the police, the people being held accountable often act like fugitives running from the law. The heart-to-heart honesty of friends is lost. The relationship trust breaks down. The person being held accountable may avoid contact with their partner or lie about their struggle. The partner may become critical or even abusive.

Remember, accountability is supposed to bring in positive peer pressure, encouragement, and the cathartic benefit of sharing your struggles. If you're a fugitive, you're hiding, not sharing your struggles. As a practical example, when wives hold their husbands accountable, it often turns into a police-fugitive relationship. This is especially the case in the early days when a husband first admits to using porn. (See Appendix A for more information.)

***If you're acting as a police officer, you're no longer a peer, not necessarily encouraging, and probably not a safe person to share struggles with.***

### 3. Accountability Is Motivated by Shame

Oftentimes, shame is the motivating factor in an accountability relationship. *I can't mess up, or I'll be ashamed.*

In some ways, this is natural. If we think looking at porn is shameful, we'll feel ashamed if we have to admit to doing it. Nate Larkin says, "As a tool for short-term behavior modification, [shame] is remarkably effective."

Long-term, however, shame-based accountability is disastrous. Larkin continues:

*After every failure, I would lecture myself, mimicking voices from my childhood: "You should be ashamed of yourself. I am so ashamed of you." If only I could hate my sin or hate myself enough, I thought, I would be able to stop, but this is a strategy that never worked. As it turns out, there is no bottom to the shame spiral.* xxxvii

Shame-based accountability can happen even if the ally has no intention of shaming the person held accountable—the shame may be self-generated. This shame, often connected with experiences from our past, can drive a person even deeper into porn. The shame spiral offers no freedom—only more shame.

Why is this? The shame spiral distracts from God’s love and power to set us free. Luke Gilkerson says, “Shame gets mixed with the false belief that we are too broken or too wicked for God to accept or change us—much less other people. So we hide.” <sup>xxviii</sup>

An accountable person who is trying to hide from shame isn’t really an accountable person. The point of an accountability relationship is to confront shame so it can be overcome.

## 4. Meetings Are Infrequent or Sporadic

You need to schedule meetings with enough frequency to be effective. Without accountability meetings, accountability is bound to fail.

I was an ally for my friend Derek, who was battling sexual temptation. He was doing great for several weeks, and we were both excited about his progress. Then we got busy and canceled a few of our meetings. I didn’t worry too much because he had been doing so well. But before I knew it, nearly a month had gone by, and Derek had slipped back into the bad habits he was trying to overcome.

Counselor Brad Hambrick says, “Accountability is *not something* you *have* (a noun); it is something you *do* (an active tense verb).” <sup>xxxix</sup> In other words, having an accountability partner won’t help if you’re not actually meeting together and checking in on a regular basis.

How frequently you need to meet or have check-ins will depend on the severity of the porn problem. But the general rule, especially when first starting recovery, is to *meet often*.

## 5. Accountability Is Confession-Based

We've noted James 5:16, which says we should confess our sins to one another. Owning our mistakes and confessing them is important. But if this is all there is to an accountability relationship, it's rarely effective.

*"How have you been this week?"*

*"OK, I guess. I messed up again."*

*"Did you look at porn?"*

*"Yeah."*

*"OK, let's pray about it."*

Imagine you have this conversation for two months in a row. Eventually, whether you're the ally or the person being held accountable, you're going to ask, "What's the point of this?"

Unfortunately, a lot of people approach accountability this way. It's simply a list of questions, usually yes or no. Accountability is often reduced to the confession of failures. The person confessing their failure may feel a little better or may just feel embarrassed. They fail to meet their goals; heads go down and sheepish looks are exchanged. But nothing changes.

Clearly, something isn't working! Luke Gilkerson writes:

*Confession of sin can go wrong is when it becomes an end in and of itself. This is when we believe confession is the only point of accountability, something we do to put to rest our uneasy consciences and get something off our chests. These kinds of accountability relationships make "getting the secret out" the whole point. <sup>xi</sup>*

While the therapeutic aspect of confession is certainly good, it's not the end goal of accountability. When it is, accountability fails to lead to real change.

## 6. Accountability Is Just a Checklist

If accountability meetings involve only a limited set of yes or no questions, it's likely to fail.

A list of pre-determined questions can be helpful for getting started. However, if you never progress beyond this, it becomes a routine. It's all about the questions and ceases to be about the relationship.

Remember, the purpose of accountability is about bearing burdens. It's about sharing goals. It's about having allies who go down into the slimy pit to help you fight. A checklist can't do this.

For a person who's deeply hooked by porn, you're unlikely to get to the real root causes if you stick to the script. The most powerful accountability relationships are the ones that get past the basic questions and dig deep into the underlying motivations. They explore the thoughts, emotions, and actions together—more on the kind of questions that are helpful in the next chapter.

### Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Have you had an accountability relationship that failed or was ineffective?
2. Which of these reasons for failed accountability do you think is most common? Can you think of any other reasons accountability might fail?
3. Why is it so important for accountability relationships to move past a checklist?

# A Step-by-Step Guide to Accountability

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**Some of you reading may feel like you've had more than enough on accountability. *I get it—just send me the reports already!* If that's you, wonderful! You can stop reading right now.**

But maybe you've read to this point and just feel overwhelmed. You appreciate the importance of accountability, but you really just want to know *how to do it*. Maybe you're looking for an ally and aren't sure where to begin.

Here's a step-by-step guide to accountability, beginning with the qualities of a good ally and ending with the logistics of setting up meetings.

## Qualities of a Good Ally

If you're looking for an ally, start with the people you already know: friends, family, a pastor, or fellow church member. But don't be afraid to look outside the box.

Porn recovery expert Michael Leahy advises, "As a recovering sex addict, I knew better than to follow the conventional pastoral counseling wisdom and go looking for what I call the 'Local Moses.'" <sup>xli</sup> He means your ally doesn't have to be super-spiritual. The holiest ally isn't always the best ally.

An ally is a trustworthy friend who wants what's best for you. They may not be the buddy you hang out with on the weekends. But a true friend will value what's good for you and help you run after it. You want someone who knows you and cares about you enough to speak the truth, even when it hurts.

Licensed counselor and psychologist Dr. Peter Kleponis says that a good accountability partner will:

- ⚡ Be compassionate.
- ⚡ Be tough.
- ⚡ Never give up.
- ⚡ Use their own experience to be a better partner. <sup>xliii</sup>

So, what does this look like, practically speaking? We can summarize by emphasizing four important things that good accountability allies do.

## 1. Listen Before Speaking

The ally's first job is to understand the person they're keeping accountable. Even an expert counselor or therapist can't help someone they don't understand. Understanding comes from careful listening. An accountability partner is there to enter a conversation, not give a monologue or lecture.

Porn recovery expert and coach Jeff Fisher said this about his long-term ally:

*The best thing he could do was listen, especially early on. He recognized that I was in a very broken place. He could feel my desperation, raw emotion, and fear. His job was to listen and let me talk. Even though he and I go back far in our relationship, he needed me to know that he wasn't going to leave me and that he cared. <sup>xliii</sup>*

## 2. Ask Open-Ended Questions

Often this is as simple as adding a follow-up question that allows more detail. Instead of stopping after, "Did you look at porn last week?", try asking, "Can you tell me how you were feeling when you looked at porn?" Or, "How was your day going before you looked at porn? What emotions were you experiencing?"

For someone who's really struggling to meet their goals or break a bad habit, these kinds of accountability questions help get to the deeper motivations.

Counselor Brad Hambrick <sup>xliv</sup> offers more probing questions that partners can ask to go deeper with their accountability relationships:

- ⚡ What are you doing to enjoy life?
- ⚡ What new stressors are entering your life?
- ⚡ Would you like to “just hang out”?
- ⚡ Who or what is getting too much airtime in your thought life right now?
- ⚡ What are you passionate about in the coming weeks, months, or years? How is it going?

### **3. Encourage Rather Than Criticize**

If an accountability partner berates and criticizes the person they’re holding accountable, it can be deeply discouraging and even detrimental. Remember, the role of a partner isn’t to police behavior: it’s to come alongside and encourage good behavior.

The partner reminds you of something you’ve both agreed is important. The mechanism that makes this effective is a combination of positive peer pressure and genuine care—not coercive force or the threat of punishment.

If your partnership is based on criticism or negativity, it undermines the power of accountability.

### **4. Challenge Rather Than Enable**

We mentioned one of the common pitfalls of accountability is that it’s often reduced to confession, “Well, I messed up again this week.” Confession is good, and there’s something cathartic about admitting failures to a friend.

However, if this is ALL that happens in accountability, it fails to tap the real power for positive change.

Good accountability partners do not enable bad behavior. They encourage you, but they don’t excuse you. The third point (“encourage rather than criticize”) does NOT

mean that an accountability partner won't show tough love or brutal honesty when needed! A good partner challenges people to improve, to hold a higher standard, and to pursue what's good.

This means speaking the truth even if it's uncomfortable. It means calling out false beliefs, negative attitudes, and destructive choices. Dr. Peter Kleponis says, "Don't be afraid to challenge your friend... While these may be difficult conversations to have, they will go a long way in helping." <sup>xlv</sup>

## 4 Steps to Establishing the Partnership

Ideally, an accountability partnership begins when someone asks to be kept accountable, and then both people sit down and talk about it.

This doesn't always happen. There have been a few times when I've been asked to keep someone accountable out of the blue, and it's unclear what the struggles are and what their expectation of me is.

While great accountability relationships can come about in a variety of ways, I recommend these four steps to help you get started on the right foot.

### 1. Get Clear on the Problem

Admitting to a struggle with pornography can be difficult and embarrassing. Many people reaching out for help don't want to come right out and say what the problem is. They may beat around the bush or use euphemisms.

But honesty and clarity are foundational to making sure this relationship works. It may take time to build the level of trust and openness needed for real accountability. But the more you can get out in the open from the start, the easier it's going to be down the road. If you're asking someone to be your ally, honesty is the best policy.

If someone has invited you to be his or her ally with Covenant Eyes, I strongly recommend you ask clarifying questions so you both understand what the relationship is about.

For example:

“Sarah, I received your invitation to get your Covenant Eyes reports. I’d love to sit down and talk about this a bit so I can understand how I can help.”

Here are some questions that I recommend you ask when you have this discussion:

- ⚡ What specific thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are you dealing with that you would like me to keep you accountable for?
- ⚡ Have you struggled with porn in the past? Are you currently struggling with porn?
- ⚡ Have you tried unsuccessfully to quit looking at porn before?

Obviously, the specific questions you ask are going to vary depending on the situation, how well you know the person, and how much detail they’ve already disclosed.

Don’t be discouraged if it feels awkward at first or if they seem hesitant to tell you everything. It can take time to build up enough trust to be completely open about struggles with porn. But it’s important they understand that *you can only help to the extent they are honest with you about the struggle.*

It’s also helpful to get an idea of how deep the struggle is. Not everyone trapped in the pit of porn has fallen there headlong. There’s a long winding staircase of temptation, and different people are on different steps.

There’s a big difference between someone who periodically views porn because no one is watching and someone who has been trying to quit for ten years and can’t. In many cases, the ally only becomes aware of the depth of the problem after time. But the sooner you understand the size and strength of the enemy, the better.

It’s also never a bad idea to seek professional counseling in addition to friendship-based accountability. If someone comes to you for accountability, don’t hesitate to advise this. Particularly when it comes to sorting out the connection between past trauma and present struggles, a qualified counselor can be an invaluable resource.

## 2. Define Your Goals

It's important to discuss and define the goals of the accountability relationship at the outset. What do you want accountability for? If accountability partners have very different goals and very different ideas of success, it can lead to confusion or frustration.

To avoid this, make the goals specific and measurable. "Get healthy" might be your overall objective, but you need some specific parameters for how you're going to measure your success. "Exercise 4 times per week" or "stop eating sugar for the month of June" are better goals because they are specific and measurable.

What does that look like for quitting porn? In the book *Freedom Starts Today*, John Elmore says you should set your goals for just one day at a time.<sup>xlvi</sup> At Covenant Eyes, we used this principle to start "Victory Week," where we encourage our members to celebrate their victories, whether it's a month free of porn, a week, or even just 24 hours.

Kara and her husband celebrated the small victories that built on each other until their broken marriage was finally restored:

*We are so grateful to Covenant Eyes as it has helped us rebuild trust in our relationship... Covenant Eyes provides us with protection and security in our relationship and [helps us] fight against his addiction together. We are so grateful for his victory of one year sober. I'm so proud of him! And it all started with just one step at a time. One step to follow God. One step to choose to use tools to help overcome his addiction. A choice every day to stay sober.*

One step at a time. Whether it's daily, weekly, or even monthly goals will depend on where the individual is at with their goals. The point is, you should take it in bite-sized chunks that can easily be achieved in the chosen time frame.

You also need to have a clear system in place for monitoring your activity and reporting your progress. This is where the Covenant Eyes software comes in. The Covenant Eyes app monitors your screen for pornographic content and sends regular reports to your chosen ally.

The important thing is to have goals and also have the reporting in place to measure them. You'll use this reporting as a tool to guide your accountability conversations and ensure openness and honesty about the progress that's being made.

### **3. Find a Good Meeting Time**

This goes hand-in-hand with specific and measurable goals.

How often are you going to meet in person? How often are you going to check in with a phone call or text? The frequency needed for a partnership will depend a lot on who is involved and what the accountability is for.

There are lots of circumstances that can dictate the frequency of your meetings. It can be challenging to find the time! However, it's also important to consider the level of accountability needed for the goals in question.

If someone needs accountability to break an addiction, 12-step programs advise meeting daily for the first 90 days. Daily meetings aren't feasible for a lot of us, but you can still check in with someone via text or a quick phone call.

Many partners meet on a weekly basis with more frequent check-ins in between. I've had a few long-term accountability partners where the check-ins were less frequent—every few weeks or so. Again, consider the goals in question and how advanced the accountable person is in their progress toward them.

Once you've set a schedule, determine a limited period of time you're going to follow it (e.g., 90 check-ins in 90 days with weekly in-person meetings). Once this time is up, re-evaluate the schedule and adjust as needed. This is important so you can avoid exhausting the relationship.

### **4. Go Deep With Conversation**

Yes, you do want to have specific goals and some clear reporting to measure them. However, to tap the real value of accountability, you'll need to leave the door open for deeper discussion. Move past a checklist of yes or no questions. Get to the heart.

This is particularly the case if the accountability is to help quit an unwanted behavior, such as drinking, gambling, or looking at porn. These behaviors are often rooted in deep emotional suffering.

A true friend cares enough to dig past the surface issue and get to the deeper motivations and inclinations of the heart. The true friend wants them to achieve what's best for them, not merely police their behavior. This requires deep conversation, and this is where the real power of accountability lies.

## The ABCs of Reports

Covenant Eyes Screen Accountability monitors your computer or mobile device for pornographic images. Install the Covenant Eyes app, then invite an ally to receive your reports. The Screen Accountability reports include a selection of screenshots from each device being monitored, highlighting pornographic images if they are detected. All the images in the reports are blurred, which keeps any sensitive information from being included in the reports as well as shielding the ally from potentially explicit content. Once your accountability partnership is in place, you'll begin receiving the Covenant Eyes reports. The reports will indicate if any concerning images were viewed. You can also see a representative selection of what was viewed on the devices being monitored.

We advise checking the reports even if the subject line indicates no concerns. The reports provide a helpful centerpiece for the accountability discussions.

Here are what I like to call the "ABCs of reports." These three principles apply whether the report looks good or there are concerning images.

### **A. Adopt an Attitude of Curiosity**

I've spoken with many allies, and I often see two opposite attitudes in how they approach the reports. One is highly suspicious—always assuming the worst about every detail of the report. The other is highly trusting—always assuming things are fine, even when there's concerning activity reported.

Both attitudes are unhelpful. I was recently talking with my ally, and I asked whether he'd been looking at my reports.

“Oh yes, I was meaning to talk with you,” he replied. “I guess I just assumed you were okay.”

It turns out I was okay. But what he said next struck me, “I guess I should be more curious instead of assuming things are fine because I trust you.”

My ally and I have a great relationship with a lot of trust on both sides. That’s a wonderful blessing. But he recognized he couldn’t effectively keep me accountable if he always assumed I wasn’t struggling.

The word “curiosity” that he used is important. If he went the opposite direction and adopted an attitude of suspicion instead of trust, it would hurt our relationship.

However, by setting aside assumptions and simply being curious about my well-being, he can ask the right questions to keep me accountable and make sure I’m staying on track.

## **B. Be Discussing the Reports Regularly**

I’ve found, both as someone seeking accountability and as an ally for others, approaching the subject of struggling with porn or lust is usually the most difficult part—often harder than the actual discussion! Telling someone you’re struggling can be hard, even if you’ve admitted it in the past. For allies, it can be just as uncomfortable to ask about someone else’s struggles.

However, effective accountability means regularly having these discussions.

Make sure you have a regularly scheduled accountability meeting, whether by phone or in person. Even if you or your ally are experiencing victory over porn, to the point where it’s not much of a temptation, the reports should be a stepping-stone to conversations about temptation and purity in general.

Maybe the struggle shifts from explicit porn to unhelpful images on social media, or even wasting too much time online. You can use the “Device Activity” section of the report to talk about the use of technology, and how to spur one another on to greater purity.

Maybe it even goes past what's on your screen to the images you see around you or the thoughts that come into your mind. The Covenant Eyes reports are still a great place to start.

With my allies, I've found that after moving past the struggle with porn itself, the door is opened to greater exhortation, more transparency, and transformation of the underlying heart motives.

### **C. Click "Reply" for Immediate Follow-up**

An easy way to have daily check-ins is to simply click "reply" on the Screen Accountability report after you've reviewed it.

It only takes a few seconds, but it can be a tremendous encouragement to one who is struggling. It can also help break the ice for later conversations if you can't meet right away. When you see a concerning image, you can reply expressing your concern, ask if everything is all right, or even use this to schedule an in-person meeting if you don't already have a regular time established.

When you see a good report, it's a great opportunity to congratulate successes and affirm the positive decisions that someone is making.

Whether the report is good or bad, the important thing is that you're keeping the lines of communication open.

## **The Accountability Meeting**

You can stop there with the reports. Frankly, most people do, and many have found freedom from porn that way. But I encourage you to go deeper.

Receiving the reports and following up via text or email is only scratching the surface of accountability. To tap the full benefits of accountability, most experts advise regular accountability meetings.

Once you have scheduled the accountability meeting, I suggest the following basic outline: 1) **affirm** your friend and 2) **ask** the tough questions to help them 3) **achieve** their goals.

## 1. Affirm Your Friend

What are you affirming? Essentially, you're affirming at least four things:

- ✎ Affirm the truth that porn is both sinful AND harmful.
- ✎ Affirm the power of the Gospel to set sinners free from sin and heal all wounds.
- ✎ Affirm the new identity we have in Christ.
- ✎ Affirm your love and friendship.

There may be more that you want to add to this list. But it's important to start with the affirmation of the unshakable truths that support the accountability relationship. These affirmations are true whether or not they've looked at porn.

Choose a selection of scriptures to read aloud, then pray an affirmation of these truths:

### **1) *Porn offends God and hurts me like every other sin.***

Suggested readings: Matthew 5:27-30; Galatians 5:19-21; 1 Peter 4:3-5.

Each of these passages talks about the destructive power of sin. We've seen that quitting porn can be hard when our brains have been conditioned to want it. Recovery includes regular reminders that porn is poison for our souls, it's warping our minds, and it's damaging our relationships with God, family, and friends.

However, you don't want to heap shame on someone who is broken by their bondage to porn. If you spend too long here, it's not going to be helpful. When your ally comes to you crushed and defeated by failure, you can simply acknowledge the destructive nature of porn and move on—this is only the first step.

You also need to affirm that porn is "like every other sin." Yes, there are some unique things about porn, but it's the same as other sins in the sense that it offends God and hurts us. It's important to remember because it's easy to be legalistic when it comes to porn.

## ***2) The Gospel sets sinners free from sin and heals all wounds.***

Suggested readings: Romans 6:23; 1 John 1:8-9; Psalm 34:18

These passages speak of the power of God for salvation. Twelve-step programs use the expression, “My own best thinking got me here.” This is essentially the same acknowledgment we make to God in confession. We admit that we are helpless to overcome our own sin and dependent on God for his mercy and grace.

The one good thing about bondage to porn is that it can make us realize our helplessness in the face of sin and our need for salvation.

These verses remind us that God forgives sin—including porn—through the blood of Jesus. God heals the wounds of the brokenhearted, including those we inflict on ourselves through habitual porn use. There is forgiveness and mercy for everyone who calls on Jesus.

We need this reminder, both on days when we’re experiencing victory over lust and on days when we’re crushed by defeat.

## ***3) We have a new identity in Christ.***

Suggested readings: Romans 6:1-4; Ephesians 4:17-24; 2 Corinthians 5:17.

Each of these passages speaks to the new identity that is found in Jesus for those who confess their sins. Christians cannot be defined by porn—even if they fall back into it repeatedly. Christ gives a new identity free from guilt and shame.

Shame is an incredibly powerful force in the thoughts and feelings of someone in bondage to porn. It is not only the product of viewing porn, but it’s often the motivating impulse that drives a person back to porn.

## **2. Ask the Tough Questions to Help Them**

What are you asking?

Full-orbed accountability means asking questions about a person’s thoughts, feelings, and actions. This is relationally motivated. To fill the role of ally, you’re striving to truly know them. You want to understand the way they process things and their emotions.

These questions not only build the relationship, but they can reveal some of the key triggers that lead them to porn. Pastor and author Tim Chester gives a list of common triggers: <sup>xlvii</sup>

- ⚡ Boredom
- ⚡ Exposure
- ⚡ Loneliness
- ⚡ Opportunity
- ⚡ Stress
- ⚡ Tiredness
- ⚡ Rejection

As you identify the most triggering states and situations, you can take practical steps to avoid the temptation. Is boredom a trigger? Brainstorm activities to fill the time that might otherwise lead to porn. Exposure? Find out where someone is being exposed to triggering content and how to avoid those places.

Understanding triggers is important, but it only scratches the surface. Appendix C is a personal assessment that you can send to the person you're holding accountable. This assessment asks a lot of tough questions that go deep.

These questions begin to peel back the surface motives and get to the heart of why they keep looking at porn and what it will take to stop. They should take time to fill it out prior to your accountability meeting. Don't think of the personal assessment or the questions on it as a checklist. Think of it as a stepping-stone to deeper and more authentic conversations about the things that really matter.

### **3. Achieve Their Goals**

Help your friend achieve their goals by celebrating victory milestones and working with them to establish a concrete plan of action for the next several weeks or months.

There are three areas to note:

1. Setbacks/Falls. These are the pits along the way. Label them specifically based on past setbacks: e.g. home alone on Friday night and unable to sleep, watched porn.
2. Unhelpful Behaviors/habits. These are the seemingly unimportant decisions that can lead to a setback. It could be drinking alcohol, watching a triggering TV show, sleeping too much or too little, or skipping devotions.
3. Helpful Behaviors/Habits. These are the healthy and productive activities that are going to replace porn. Quitting porn is as much about addition as it is about subtraction. On the one hand, it means starving the old desires to look at porn until the hunger fades—that's the subtraction. But on the other hand, quitting requires the addition of new hobbies and habits that will take the place of porn.

You can simply talk these over, but it's often helpful to write these things down during the week and bring them out during your accountability meetings.

A calendar works great for this. If you take the time needed to fill it out accurately, this strategic plan will serve as a roadmap to a porn-free life.

Quitting porn and replacing it with new habits is going to take time. Each person is unique, so the process has different twists and turns for each person. Allow some time to see where the biggest struggles are and what new patterns of behavior are most helpful.

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Which quality of a good ally do you think is most important? Why?
2. Why is it important to “adopt an attitude of curiosity” with the reports?
3. Which of the listed triggers for porn do you think is most common? Can you think of any that weren't included in the list?

# Conclusion

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**Does accountability seem daunting? Do you feel overwhelmed? Do you feel like a failure in your accountability relationships? Don't! There is grace and mercy for imperfect allies.**

You don't have to do everything perfectly to be a help and encouragement to those who are struggling. I've been encouraged to see God work through my very imperfect efforts to be an ally for the struggling. Likewise, God has used very imperfect allies to further my growth. The main thing is humility, a caring heart, and a willingness to step into the pit and help—consistently.

We've included guidelines that I hope are effective for your accountability conversations and relationships. But there's no trick to accountability. There's no simple formula. God in His wisdom has called us to live in community with one another as believers. Accountability is simply the way we were designed to live out this calling as believers. It's not complicated, but it's not easy either.

Since the days with my friend David, I've heard the call to accountability many more times. I've also sought accountability for myself many times as well. There have been challenges and disappointments. I've sat with men groveling in defeat and celebrated with others in their victory over temptation. I've seen God at work.

As I've grown, my accountability relationships have likewise grown deeper and richer. The focus has moved beyond keeping away from porn and lust to challenging one another to greater godliness. I've found that accountability works best when it's built on Christ-centered friendships. My accountability partners are now my closest friends.

My prayer for you is that you can experience the rich blessing of accountability friendships as well.

# Appendix A: For Spouses

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**If your spouse is looking at porn, then you may feel like you're stuck in the pit of their sin. Much of what we've said here about accountability does apply in these situations. However, it's more complicated when you're so personally affected by someone else's struggle.**

In our ebook, *Hope After Porn*, Laura tells the heart-breaking story of discovering her husband's porn use (again), shortly after giving birth to their child:

*When I finally scanned the history on Ryan's computer, I found some images that he had recently viewed. Even though I wasn't surprised, I did feel freshly hurt and betrayed. I felt the familiar rush of jealousy, of wanting to look intently at every two-dimensional woman to discover what she had that I didn't have, what she did that I didn't do, or what she was that I couldn't be. I clenched my jaw and set my heart in disgust towards my husband: my heart was filled with bitterness toward this man who wasted our time, energy, and resources on lust while I worked so hard to take care of our family. <sup>xlviii</sup>*

If you can relate to Laura's story, you may be wondering just what your role is when it comes to accountability. A common question we receive at Covenant Eyes is, "Should I be my spouse's accountability partner?"

Our answer to this question is usually "no."

This may be surprising, but we say this both for the sake of the spouse and the person struggling with porn. Their needs for accountability are very different.

For a spouse who has been betrayed, “accountability” means proving a changed lifestyle and earning back trust. As Laura shares in her story, the trust had been broken, and she had to enforce some strict consequences on Ryan for his behavior.

But for the person in deep bondage to porn, a different kind of accountability is needed. Laura had known about Ryan’s struggles with porn. She had confronted him before. Ryan felt bad; he apologized and promised to change his behavior—but he didn’t. His accountability to his wife didn’t change anything.

Why is that? For many in bondage to porn, the threat of additional consequences has already failed to break them free from the habit.

Eventually, Laura sent Ryan away to the care of two allies who took him through a rigorous 40-day accountability program. Ryan was able to get the help he needed to address his problem, and Laura was able to get the help and encouragement she needed to deal with her hurt, bitterness, and disappointment.

If your husband or wife is in recovery, receiving reports of their activity and trying to keep them accountable may be an unhelpful burden for both of you. Even after a period of successful recovery, receiving accountability reports may be triggering for you.

You may care more for your spouse than anyone else, but the stakes of your relationship are too high. That’s why we encourage you to point your spouse to another person—a friend, mentor, pastor.

We have created a resource specifically for spouses called *Porn and Your Husband*. It will walk you through practical tips as you seek healing and restoration for your marriage—and yourself. It will help you guide your husband toward healing without turning you into the babysitter.

# Appendix B: For Parents

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**If you're a parent who's gone through the surprise and grief of finding out your child looks at porn, you're not alone. Barb shares her story:**

*Five years ago, I learned my son was struggling with pornography. I was shocked and devastated. Feeling guilty and hopeless, I struggled to sleep and cried endlessly. I couldn't understand how this had happened. <sup>xlix</sup>*

Barb is just one of many. I've spoken with hundreds of parents who've felt the exact same thing.

As a parent, it's natural (and good!) to want to shield your children from evil. But too many parents believe that their children will never be exposed to porn. Too many parents believe that their children will never be tempted to look at porn. Too many parents believe they can create a bubble where porn will never be an issue.

Simply trying to block porn on the family computer isn't enough. Initial porn exposure is usually accidental, but the porn industry has a multi-billion-dollar arsenal at its disposal and no qualms about using it to target children. <sup>i</sup>

Here's the reality: 79% of millennial men and 64% of women watch pornography at least once a month. <sup>ii</sup> For adult porn users trying to quit through recovery programs, the average age at which they were first exposed is about ten years old. <sup>iii</sup>

It's no longer realistic to imagine that we can shield our kids from exposure. Even if you do manage to create an environment in which a child never encounters the horror of porn, they will still be vulnerable the moment they leave the house.

Accountability and open discussion are the missing pieces of the puzzle. Although this resource is geared primarily toward friendship-based accountability between adults, many of the accountability principles apply to parents and children as well, especially as children reach their teen years.

However, if you're a parent of younger children, I encourage you to download our three family-oriented ebooks: *Equipped*, *Connected*, and *Confident*. Whereas the resource you're reading is about accountability in the context of mature relationships, these three books give you an action plan for raising up children to be accountable. They give tips on age-appropriate conversations about porn and help you establish healthy boundaries and safeguards.

# Appendix C: Personal Assessment

The following is a personal assessment designed to help you develop a life of godly humility, purity, and integrity. To the best of your ability, fill out this assessment before speaking with your ally and then use this as a template for conversation.

The aims of this list are to help you ask the questions that are critical to the ongoing success and growth of the individual you're holding accountable. These questions are designed to explore their thoughts, feelings, and actions.

It may be difficult to get through all of these questions in a single meeting, so choose those which are most pertinent for you, or spread them out over the course of several meetings.

## Accountability Questions

Fill out the following questionnaire before meeting with your ally or accountability group. Use it to spark discussion and encouraging conversation.

### Sexual Purity

1. I have avoided looking at pornography or other sexually provocative images online or offline.

1=Help! (Circle a Number) 9=Stable  
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

2. I have avoided images, interactions, or stories online I knew could be seductive or titillating (but wouldn't necessarily be considered "pornographic").

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

3. I have kept my eyes from second glances and kept my mind from entertaining thoughts about someone (other than my spouse).

1=Help! (Circle a Number) 9=Stable

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

4. I have actively avoided known triggers of sexual temptation or titillation.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

5. I am successfully fighting the desire to be noticed by or to attract the attention of other men or women (other than my spouse).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

6. I have not spent time with a man or woman in a way that could be viewed as compromising to my purity (or my faithfulness to my spouse).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

### Stewarding My Time, Talents, and Treasures

1. I am intentional about showing love to others by the way I serve them with my gifts/talents.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

2. I have been intentional about spending appropriate time with my family/household.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

3. My family/household is enjoying joy and harmony.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

4. My time with technology or media has not displaced time with God, family, friends, work, or my neighbors.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

5. I have spoken to and about others with edifying words, not with words that damaged them or their reputation.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

6. I pray about my financial expenditures, and I am intentionally generous with others. People can tell from my financial expenditures that God is my greatest treasure.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

7. I am intentional about the use my spare time to pursue wholesome activities.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

8. I am intentional about my diet, exercise, and sleep habits.

1=Help! (Circle a Number) 9=Stable

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

9. I am not creating the impression that I am better than I am. I do not exaggerate or make much of myself.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

10. I am feeling energized for the week ahead.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

### Satisfaction in God

1. I am resting completely in what Christ has done for me—not obsessing about my own failures nor putting stock in my own performance.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

2. Regularly focusing on the gospel gives me great joy that overcomes life's disappointments.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

3. When I hear disappointing news, I do not complain or live in doubt or fear, but instead, I am inspired to pray and trust in God's care and providence.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

4. I am enjoying prayer, and I am praying for others and myself with consistency.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

5. The Bible is consistently shaping the way I think and live. I spend regular time reading or hearing God's words, and as a result of that time, I have determined to better trust and obey God in specific ways.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

## Dispositions of the Heart

*Often this can be a difficult assessment to make, so ask yourself some critical questions. What am I most afraid of losing? What do I desire more than anything else? What do I tend to revolve my life around? To what do I run for comfort or escape? What do I tend to worry about? What do I find myself daydreaming or fantasizing about? Where do my thoughts drift in the quiet moments? What do I complain about most? What angers me the most? What has caused me to get angry with God? What do I pray for? What makes me happiest? What do I want to have more than anything else? What do I make the biggest sacrifices for? Whose approval am I seeking? On my deathbed, what would I say has made my life worthwhile?*

**1. Though Christ is the one I want to put at the center of my life, there are specific people, experiences, or objects that I am tempted to make a chief source of my significance, satisfaction, and fulfillment. (Check all that apply.)**

- |  |  |                                |  |
|--|--|--------------------------------|--|
| <input type="radio"/> Sexual Pleasure    | <input type="radio"/> Girlfriend/Boyfriend | <input type="radio"/> Career   | <input type="radio"/> Health             |
| <input type="radio"/> Financial Security | <input type="radio"/> Parent               | <input type="radio"/> My Image | <input type="radio"/> Comfort            |
| <input type="radio"/> Spouse             | <input type="radio"/> Hobby                | <input type="radio"/> Friend   | <input type="radio"/> Opinions of Others |
| <input type="radio"/> Future Spouse      |  |                                |  |

**2. I am currently fighting these dispositions in my heart. (Check all that apply.)**

- |                                     |                                       |                                      |   |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Pride         | <input type="radio"/> Bitterness      | <input type="radio"/> Discontentment | <input type="radio"/> Worry                                     |
| <input type="radio"/> Resentment    | <input type="radio"/> Covetousness    | <input type="radio"/> Doubt          | <input type="radio"/> Irritability                              |
| <input type="radio"/> Self-pity     | <input type="radio"/> Critical Spirit | <input type="radio"/> Grumbling      | <input type="radio"/> Jealousy                                  |
| <input type="radio"/> Unforgiveness | <input type="radio"/> Deceptiveness   | <input type="radio"/> Ingratitude    | <input type="radio"/> Preoccupation with the Opinions of Others |

## Open-Ended Questions

**What am I doing about these dispositions of the heart? (mentioned on the previous page)**

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**What on my Internet Accountability Report should draw my Partner's attention?**

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**What do I hope none of my Accountability Partners ask me about?**

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**When it comes to my habitual sins, is there a time of day, a place, a person, or a mood that tends to open the door to more tempting situations?**

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**What good habit do I believe God wants to form in my life? Have I taken specific steps to develop that habit?**

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**What am I praying for? Have I received any specific answers to my prayers?**

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**How can my accountability partner(s) pray for me?**

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# Appendix D: Recommended Resources

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## Ebooks:

### ***Your Brain on Porn***

By Luke Gilkerson

<https://learn.covenanteyes.com/your-brain-on-porn-1/>

Learn the top 5 ways porn rewires your brain and what you can do about it.

### ***New Fruit***

By Lisa Eldred & Crystal Renaud Day

<https://learn.covenanteyes.com/new-fruit/>

In our new ebook written by women for women, you'll hear powerful stories of transformation and freedom, and learn proven methods to break free.

### ***The Porn Circuit***

By Sam Black

<https://learn.covenanteyes.com/porn-circuit/>

Science shows us that using pornography taps into powerful neurochemistry that can quickly lead a person to use porn habitually. But freedom is possible, and The Porn Circuit tells you how to beat porn in 90 days.

## ***Hobbies and Habits***

By Lisa Eldred

<https://learn.covenanteyes.com/hobbies-and-habits/>

Your hobbies and daily habits can help you find freedom from porn. In this powerful and practical ebook, we explore how to harness the power of habit to quit porn for good.

## **Email Challenges and Devotionals:**

### ***Overcoming Porn: The 40 Day Challenge***

<https://learn.covenanteyes.com/porn-free-challenge/>

Quitting porn is hard. Victory is absolutely possible, but to be successful, you need a plan. That's exactly what Overcome Porn: The 40 Day Challenge gives you. It's 40 days of guided learning and action designed to help you win and put porn behind you for good.

### ***STRIVE***

<https://www.strive21.com/>

Created in partnership with Matt Fradd, STRIVE is a 21-day porn detox designed specifically for men. STRIVE helps men understand why they go to porn in the first place, why they should break free, and equips them with the tools they need to quit using porn and begin living the life to which God is calling them.

### ***New Fruit***

<https://my.bible.com/reading-plans/22223-new-fruit-7-days-of-porn-recovery-for-women>

New Fruit is a Bible reading plan for women who struggle with pornography, based on the ebook, New Fruit, by Lisa Eldred and Crystal Renaud-Day. New Fruit looks at the roots of sexual addiction and points to a new identity and freedom in Jesus.

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