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POSTCARDS FROM CORINTH

DEALING WITH HABITUAL SIN

POSTCARDS FROM CORINTH • CHAPTER EXCERPT

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Here, for example, is a partial list of the topics covered: Habitual Sin, Authority Issues, Christian Counseling, Fasting, Theological Conflicts, Coaching Through Trials, Challenging to Conferences, Confronting Sin, Ministering Cross-Culturally, The Role of Faith, Difficulties in Sharing the Ministry of the Spirit, Selection, Conflict Resolution, Why Does Leadership Matter, Conducting Basic Follow-up... Postcards contains 47 articles on all critical issues of discipleship.



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Blow Pops

Finding life and growth out of the ashes of destructive sin

Let's start with a story. Rocky is "the man." You've met few students like him. He has great potential as a student leader. He is truly seeking to grow in his faith and has a strong desire to influence others. He is socially adept and well liked. This kind of key leader only comes along once every few years.

Despite his leadership capabilities, Rocky has one seemingly minor problem. It's really a bad habit that he can't shake--Rocky is addicted to Charms Blow-Pops. While it started as a harmless pleasure, his habit is starting to extract a toll on his life. The cost of eating two-dozen Blow-Pops a day is adding up. A trip to the dentist reveals six cavities, which are not only painful, but expensive. Physically, his once chiseled frame is turning *sloshy*.

What is more alarming is how his habit is beginning to affect his relationships. His roommates are getting increasingly annoyed at finding used Blow-Pop sticks all over their room. Every time Rocky tries to quit he gets irritable and angry. His friends notice that he is spending more and more time alone.

Things hit rock bottom when Rocky is caught rummaging through his roommate's Green Bay Packer piggy bank looking for change to support his fix. Humiliated, deflated and disillusioned Rocky comes to you for help. He relates to you that he's been keenly aware that his habit has become a real problem but he's been too embarrassed to talk about it with anyone. He says he's asked the Lord countless times to remove his compulsion, tried to memorize Scripture and even promised God he would completely swear off his sweet sensations. But while he might get a few days of freedom, nothing he's tried has brought lasting change.

David prayed, "Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me" (Psalm 19:13). Unfortunately, this tongue-and-cheek story about Rocky illustrates an all too real experience for sincere believers. Like Rocky, many seeking Christ are frustrated, disillusioned and perilously close to despair because they are lumped up by habitual sins "that rule over them." And often these areas are kept hidden because of the fear of judgment and rejection.

Let's step back and use Rocky's experience as an example. Rocky's got a problem. In this case, his Blow-Pops represent an area of a person's life where one has lost control and feels a sense of powerlessness, defeat or unmanageability. Hebrews 12:1-2



offers us some insight here. In light of the great cloud of witnesses and those who have demonstrated exemplary faith in the past, the author exhorts his readers to “throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.”

Let’s look at one’s Blow-Pops through this grid. Sometimes a person’s Blow-Pop is an obvious manifestation of sin (the sin that so easily entangles)—lust, using pornography, alcohol and drug abuse, fits of rage, lying, gossiping. Other times it’s a little less obvious (that which hinders)—dependency relationships, addiction to work or academic success, use of movies, video games, or soaps, food addiction, sports, online chatting, etc.

Regardless of the form of the destructiveness, several common characteristics are often true of people struggling with habitual sin. First, there is a sincere desire to stop but an inability to do so despite their best efforts. They feel trapped in the behavior. Think about it in terms of addiction: they are powerless to stop the controlling behavior.

Second, the sin and extent of the destructiveness of the behavior remains in the dark. Consequently they experience tremendous shame and guilt. It begins to define their walk with Christ and becomes THE ISSUE of their lives.

Third, there may be a Jekyll and Hyde quality to their lives. When the behavior and sin pattern kicks in, they become someone else. In addition, they may do really well in achieving victory and then have a sudden slip or relapse seemingly out of nowhere.

Fourth, the behavior almost always isolates people from true relationship. And, both the cause and the solution of the behavior has, at its root, a relational component. Thus the solution *has to* focus on the relational and not just the moral. But, more about that later.

Finally, acting out the habitual sin has an idolatrous dynamic to it. Whatever they use in seeking to get their needs met is taking the place of God in their lives.

Yet, in the midst of the mess and heartache flowing from this failure there is hope for change—not just in the way one behaves, but deep, lasting heart change. Let’s look at a fresh view of habitual sin. To be sure, God has a holy hatred for sin and is never responsible for directly tempting anyone (James 1:13). However, isn’t it just like the Lord to use Satan’s insidious schemes as an actual opportunity for His outlandish grace and power to be displayed? As disciple makers, we have precious few windows into the hearts of people. Our Blow-Pops represent one window God can use for His glory as it relates to long-term heart and character change.

The following are some principles for us to apply as God makes a way for us to move into people’s lives and join them on their journey. For these principles to work, it is assumed that the person in view here—the grower—has a desire to change. Many aren’t convinced that what they are doing is sin or that their seemingly innocent habit is becoming a destructive force in their lives. We can love those folks, be available to them, share our own story with them, but God needs to work in their heart before they are ready to do the hard work necessary to truly change. There is a saying in Alcoholics Anonymous that fits here: “Half measures availed us nothing.”

However, in this context, we’re talking about people who truly want to change.

They are sick and tired of being strangled and suffocated by habitual sin. They have tried to be free but have not found lasting answers. It is to these people we have the privilege of offering hope.



ADDRESS SINFUL BEHAVIOR BUT KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE BIG PICTURE—RELATIONSHIP

First, by way of perspective, habitual sin needs to be addressed. But, the behavior itself isn't the main issue. In other words, the struggle this person faces is not primarily moral but relational. As John Ortberg has stated, ultimately, we are to be growing in love for God and others. This is the essence of maturity and godliness, not whether we "acted out" last week. The behavior is important, not because it is a moral failure but because it hinders and even cuts off relating with God and others in holy and intimate ways. And, as Henry Cloud relates, the behavior must be dealt with otherwise there is no hope of getting to the deeper issues of relational sin and need that will lead to more lasting and profound heart change.

HELP STUDENTS DEVELOP A STRATEGY FOR GROWTH AND CHANGE

Recognizing that one needs to keep relationship primary, the person also must have a strategy to deal with the behavior. Successful plans for lasting change always include these actions:

- Come into the light with God and others (1 John 1, James 5:16).
- Understand that we're powerless and weak and have no chance to overcome our habitual sin if left to our own devices and strength (John 15:5, 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, Matthew 5:3-4).
- Community—going beyond accountability. More on that below.
- Acceptance and direction (synonymous with grace and truth).
- Addressing issues of the heart and not just of behavior.
- Renewing of the mind, which includes submission to Scripture, worship, and experience of love *from* God and *from* others. When we read in Romans 12:2 that we are to "be transformed by the renewing of (our) mind," it is easy to focus on memorizing and meditating on Scripture so that our minds might be made new. This is undoubt-



edly important. But ask yourself: “In what ways has God renewed my mind?” For most it is through a myriad of means—Scripture, worship, prayer, service, and through the love, acceptance and honesty of others. Apply these principles to the discipleship relationship and as it relates to helping students see freedom from habitual sin.

These ideas are clearly not exhaustive. In fact there may be some issues beyond your training and experience to handle. That’s okay. One of the things that’s important for you to become familiar with is the other resources for growth available in your geographic area—pastoral, counseling and support groups.

THE BATTLE IS WON ONE DAY AT A TIME

Emphasize the one-day-at-a-time nature of the struggle. And, avoid calling students to dramatic one-time commitments. It is unwise and unrealistic to encourage them to commit to such things as purity (whatever that is) or not masturbating ever again (or this month). Most of the time people who sincerely want to walk with Christ have made countless commitments in areas of habitual sin. These can often be counter-productive in that they ultimately lead to disillusionment and despair. A more effective approach is to help students take things one day at a time. This is a biblical concept. Remember God’s provision of manna for the Israelites on a daily basis? (See also Matthew 6:11; Hebrews 3:7; 4:7). This perspective also highlights the relational nature of growth. We invite God into our daily struggles and temptations and receive moment by moment His gracious power and presence. Rather than thinking in terms of victory, think of it as a process of growth and change and the benefits of the journey.

YOU’RE NOT ALONE

Encourage students that they aren’t alone. So many think they are the only ones who struggle. Do you know of some mature students who are honest with their struggles and are walking in the light? Give them a platform and access to others. This is a huge opportunity to bring students into light and relationship and out of isolation.

Think about ways you can connect students with one another, especially in small groups. Existing Bible studies are an excellent place to start. One reason 12-step recovery groups are successful is the fellowship shared over a common experience and brokenness. Thus, the meetings and group members become a major component God uses to break people of destructive habits and set them on a course of developing more mature and healthy relationships.

Let’s talk about a specific Blow-Pop at this point. With the explosion of the Internet, more and more young people, both men and women, are finding themselves caught in

the snare of pornography. This stronghold is incredibly powerful and will affect more and more of our culture as time goes on. There are an increasing number of resources to help people ensnared by sexual sin and addiction. For group and campus settings, two excellent resources are the companion books written by Rick James called *Flesh* (for men) and *Fantasy* (for women). They are available through New Life Resources and will help move students out of isolation and into community with one another.



LEAD FROM WEAKNESS

This principle goes far deeper than simply how you lead others. Perhaps the heading should read “Live from Weakness.” Some reflective questions at this point are in order: Am I living in “the light” myself (1 John 1)? Am I embracing my own weakness and brokenness so God’s power might rest on me (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)? Am I embracing the fact that apart from Christ I can do nothing (John 15:5)? Am I appropriately opening up my life and my heart in my daily experience with others? Thus when it comes to leading others I am simply living out *who* I am. Ultimately it’s not an issue of thinking about how I can get others to share their “uglies” with me but rather a natural dynamic borne out of a lifestyle of authenticity.

Obviously there is need for some Spirit-directed discretion here. It is inappropriate for us to share things that would unduly damage a relationship or compromise other relationships in which we are involved. I’ll trust you’ll be able to make those distinctions as the Spirit directs and guides.

However, as we practice authentic living, God will naturally give insight into how to enter into another’s life. Then, we simply take advantage of opportunities to go deeper. Practically, it means looking for ways to empathize with our disciples and how they are feeling. Over time, you earn the right to enter in.

BEYOND ACCOUNTABILITY

Elements of what we commonly refer to as accountability are helpful in dealing with habitual sin. Accountability offers us the opportunity to come into the light and confess our sins to others. However, accountability groups or partners can take on the component of simply becoming a “tracking device” for sinful and destructive behavior. They can easily focus on the negative—avoiding certain behavior—and not on the positive of moving out of isolation and into authentic, real relationships. Accountability relationships can become somewhat artificial in nature. We might come to the group meeting, confess our sins, and yes be accepted, but there might be little interaction or connection outside of the meeting itself.

Perhaps a new paradigm is needed here. Ask yourself some tough questions: Am I willing “to do life” with this person(s)? That means understanding their dreams,



passions, and calling. Am I willing to speak the truth and hear the truth from these people? Am I willing to call them in the heat of the moment and not just give a report after the fact? Am I willing to explore how my emotions often drive my behavior and what I think about God and others? Who is God calling them to be? Am I willing to walk the journey of life together? Is my heart changing? Am I growing in my desire and ability to love God and others? And, of course we need to help the people we are working with ask these same questions. This might be setting the bar high, but, again, we need to think relationally not just morally.

Finally, never give up when it comes to seeking grace/truth relationships. There may be a few false starts in developing intimate connections that will last. Sometimes group members don't mesh well. Sometimes people start strong but lose focus and commitment to the group. People graduate or move away. We need to convince others, and be convinced ourselves that it's worth the risk, and the blood, sweat and tears. As a wise campus director once said to me, "Even if the group doesn't work, you can still grow because you've trusted the Lord in stepping out of isolation and toward relationship with others."

MAKE CONNECTIONS TO EXISTING BIBLICAL MODELS OF GROWTH

Before offering a specific application let's look at how we view growth within Campus Crusade for Christ. We emphasize many facets of a person's growth strategy—the importance of God's Word, prayer, God's love and forgiveness, and worship. But, two models are at the forefront when it comes to what it means to walk with Christ and grow in our faith: the Spirit-filled life and what's been labeled as the Growth Model.

Here is a brief sketch of what these mean. First, the foundational principles of the Spirit-filled life are:

- God has given His Spirit so that we can enjoy intimacy with Him and enjoy all He has for us (John 14:16-17; 1 Corinthians 2:12).
- The believer is incapable of living the Christian life in his own strength (John 15:5). To attempt to do so leads to an inability to experience the power and presence of God on a moment-by-moment basis and an inability to consistently overcome sin and temptation (Romans 7:14-25; 1 Corinthians 3:1-3; Galatians 5:16-21).
- The Spirit-filled life is the Christ-directed life by which Christ lives His life through us in the power of the Holy Spirit (John 15).
- By faith we invite the Holy Spirit to control us thus experiencing God's presence and power moment-by-moment (Romans 8:1-17; Ephesians 5:18-20; Galatians 5:22-23).

Second, in recent years we have begun to talk about heart change and character development in terms of the “Growth Model.” While there are many facets to the Growth Model, its basic principles include the recognition that a person grows best in an environment of grace and truth over time (John 1:14). Thus, in our struggle we desperately need grace (acceptance) and we desperately need truth (direction). And we need to see heart and character change as a long-term journey, not an overnight fix. Our model for growth places a heavy emphasis on moving out of isolation and into *relationship* with others.

Now, let’s make some connections between our discussion about our Blow-Pops and these two models for growth. The Spirit-filled life is the essence of admitting our powerlessness before God and our need to surrender to Him moment by moment. Consider a model from the world of addiction recovery. First, notice the first three steps of *Alcoholics Anonymous* adapted for our purposes:

- Admitted we were powerless over our Blow-Pop(s) and that our lives had become unmanageable.
- Came to believe that God could restore us to sanity.
- Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God...

Compare these steps to John 15:5: “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me and I in Him bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” The two key words that a person hears upon entering the “Program” are that they are *powerless* (“apart from me you can do nothing”) and that they need to *surrender* (“abide in me”) to God on a moment-by-moment basis. Isn’t this the essence of what it means to walk in the Spirit? In order for people to see behavioral change as it relates to their Blow-Pops, they need to embrace that they are utterly powerless to change on their own. God must be invited into each temptation in order for the behavior to change over time and the heart and mind to be renewed.

Admitting powerlessness actually becomes a blessing for it is the only way for God’s power to be manifested in a person’s life. Recall Paul’s boast in 2 Corinthians 12: “He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses ... so that Christ’s power may rest on me.”

Second, as mentioned above, the Growth Model emphasizes the relational dynamic that must be present for a person to grow and change. In AA participants are told that their only hope for recovery and healing is to attend a lot of meetings, make a lot of phone calls to other members, and get immersed in “The Fellowship.” Developing relationships with other recovering people is essential to putting aside the “drug” (our Blow-Pops).

One of the most powerful dynamics of a healthy recovery group is the recognition that there is a level playing field. It doesn’t make a bit of difference whether one enters





the door of a meeting as a CEO of a Fortune 500 company or as an ex-con recently released from the local penitentiary. There is a connection between participants that everyone is powerless and our lives are a mess because of the addiction. There is a tremendous amount of acceptance based on a common struggle.

A person also receives truth, or direction, in two forms. First, there is honesty that flows from truth. If we hope to recover, we must be brutally honest about our Blow-Pop and our “sin history.” In AA, people are told upon entering the Program that their chances of recovery are good if they are willing to be brutally honest about their addictive behavior and their sinful attitudes. Second, people receive the truth by “working the Program.” They must work through each of the 12 steps with a sponsor (loosely compared to a discipler) who can help them navigate what it means to recover and learn to live in a healthy and mature lifestyle. They do not get coddled and told they are okay but they are presented with a strategy and the tools to grow and mature.

The goal of making comparisons to AA is not to convince you to start a 12-step group, but rather to show how a relatively successful program of recovery actually mirrors in many ways biblical principles such as walking in the Spirit and moving into relationships of grace and truth. We need to show how to apply the Spirit filled life and the Growth Model directly to a person’s Blow-Pops.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

In closing, let’s look at how you can take at least one practical step toward leading your group out of isolation and into relationship. First, read Rocky’s story together, either in a small group or one-on-one. Feel free to embellish and edit it as needed. Then, take some time to think through some questions to help students break the ice and begin living in the light. Here are just a few suggestions:

- How would you counsel Rocky?
- What is he doing right?
- In what ways might his thinking and strategy for change be wrong?
- Can you relate to Rocky’s struggle?
- Would you be willing to take the risk of coming into the light with at least one of your Blow-Pops?
- What’s the most challenging thing about your struggle?
- What’s the most frustrating thing about your struggle?

- How does it feel to share about your Blow-Pop?
- What one step can you take to move toward freedom and growth in this area?



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At the conclusion of your discussion suggest an exercise. Give them each a Blow-Pop. Invite them to put the Blow-Pop in a conspicuous spot—next to the computer, night stand, bathroom sink. Suggest that each time they look at the Blow-Pop it would serve as an opportunity to quickly express their powerlessness to God over their named Blow-Pop and offer a brief prayer of surrender. In the morning when they look at the Blow-Pop, have it be a reminder to ask the Lord to help overcome sin and temptation *just for that day*.

Most importantly suggest to them how the Blow-Pop is not a reminder of their sin but an invitation into relationship. First, let it serve as a reminder that as they are tempted throughout today they can invite God into the temptation and into relationship with them. Second, the Blow-Pop can serve as a reminder to move into relationship with others who are walking the journey with them.

As we share the gospel, we will be most effective when we experience the reality of the gospel ourselves. What a privilege to help students embrace the gospel's power in areas where they've felt the greatest failure. What profound evidence of God's power being manifested in weakness and in the most unlikely "places."