

Guest Speaker – Nate Larkin

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It's an honor to be with you guys this morning and a pleasure to be here for the purpose of studying the Bible. Isn't it amazing? We can study this book, week after week, year after year and never get to the bottom of it. If you have been a Christian for very long I'm sure you had this experience. You are reading a Scripture you maybe have read a hundred times and suddenly the Holy Spirit unfolds another piece of it and you see something there. It comes alive in ways it has never come alive before. What I want to do this morning is share with you my story. I want to tell you how at the age of 42, key passages of Scripture came alive for me in new and wonderful ways.

I am one of those guys who grew up in church. It is not something I had a choice about. My dad was a preacher so when the church was open we were there. I was always small for my age, near-sighted, not very athletic. There were a lot of things I wasn't good at but I was good at church. I had the requisite skills. For one thing, I had a great memory back then. I am told that when I was just four years old my dad would sit me on the pulpit and I could reel off entire chapters of the Bible in King James English just like my mother taught them to me. It was very impressive. I could sing, too. I had a clear soprano voice and a strong set of lungs. Sometimes when my dad went out of town to preach he would bring me along to sing the offertory. I would set them up; he would knock them down. The church ladies loved me. When the service was over dad and I would stand at the back of the sanctuary and the men would shake my father's hand and the women would pinch my cheeks and tell me what a fine young man I was and predict I was going to be a preacher just like my dad. I knew they were right.

I always went to public school growing up. In school I was always the Christian kid. The kid who brought his Bible to school was me. The kid who started the Bible club – that was me. Sometimes I heard my friends refer to me behind my back as St. Nate. I always took that as a compliment – proof I was being a good witness. That after all is what was drilled into me week after week. It was my primary responsibility as a Christian to never do anything that would bring shame upon the name of Jesus. It got complicated after puberty.

My first exposure to pornography took me completely by surprise. Nobody warned me that pornography even existed. Nobody told me every boy eventually sees porn. Nobody told me that every boy likes porn because it depicts something that we are wired by God to want. I knew it was bad, but I didn't know why it was bad. There are lots of reasons why porn is bad but this perhaps is the most far reaching reason. Pornography offers an imaginary connection with a virtual person. If you accept it begins at that moment to compromise your ability to form and sustain a real relationship with an actual person. Long-term porn use creates an intimacy disorder. I didn't know that. I just felt guilty for having seen it and ashamed of having liked it. I did what guilt does – I lied. And I did what shame does – I hid – very successfully. Nobody suspected that St. Nate was developing a porn problem.

Only God can make a whole person, body, soul and spirit, but He has given to us the ability to create personalities, or personas. Sometimes people who are deeply traumatized in early

childhood would use this opportunity to create multiple personalities who carry the pain and hide from each other. We call that multiple personality disorder. Most of us are not that sick. What most of us do is create a cast of characters who more or less are aware of each other and take turns at center stage.

By junior high I realized I was well aware that I wasn't always the same person. There was home Nate, church Nate, school Nate, alone Nate, and they were different people.

A persona is a projected image kind of like a hologram. It is like a three-dimensional animated figure that from a distance looks real. Now it takes a tremendous amount of focused energy to create, sustain and animate that image. Keeping up a persona is hard work. A persona never rests. A persona exists solely to be seen. It is there for the sake of the audience and it lives at the will of the audience. It must always be scanning the room, watching the watchers, alert to any indication that somebody might be catching on so that the necessary adjustments can be made because to be discovered is to die. A persona can never sleep.

Because it is a hologram, a persona is hollow. There is nothing inside. A persona doesn't feel much of anything – just a persistent blankness, a kind of deadness. What it will eventually do is reach for some mood altering, mind altering substance or activity in a desperate attempt to fill that void and imagine if only for a moment that it is really alive.

By the way, the Bible word for persona, the New Testament word, the word Paul uses, is “flesh.”

The real me, the Nate Larkin that God knew from before the foundation of the world, the Nate who died with Adam in the garden, but came back to life miraculously through grace through faith in Christ Jesus, the me who will be with Him in glory – that is my spirit. Flesh is any me I make up. Here is the tricky thing about flesh. Flesh is devoted only to its own survival. It is completely self-centered. It has no conscience. It is capable unspeakable evil, but if it suits its purposes to be good, flesh is capable doing and looking very, very good.

No matter how good it appears, flesh, the Bible says is always hostile to God. Flesh can't see God, can't know God, and can't please God. Flesh can't worship God because God is spirit. Those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and truth. It makes the religious persona the most tragic figure of all. He is forever describing a reality he could never know. A religious persona can never know the fruit of the spirit. He can perform, but he can't love. He can't feel excitement, but not joy; numbness but not peace. He can be subtle but not gentle; sweet but not good. He can know fervor but he will never know faith. No matter how hard he may work to control his behavior he will never know self-control because he has no continuing self.

For me growing up in high school, the tough thing about being St. Nate was the really hot girls didn't want to go out with me. They came to me for counseling when they had trouble with their boyfriends because everyone knew that Nate was going to be a pastor, and that meant he was neither male nor female – just some strange third gender that was completely safe.

When I got to college, I created a new persona. Date Nate. Date Nate was a different guy. He was rakish and charming. Date Nate could get a date. I met my wife my senior year in college. I meet her in church. She met St. Nate, Date Nate didn't go to church.

She was a brand new Christian, just alive with newfound faith and she loved St. Nate. We shared Scriptures together, prayed together, and talked about the Lord. Eventually I got up the nerve to introduce her to Date Nate. She hated that guy. She thought he was a jerk. I quickly sent him into exile and I created Mate Nate: the ideal husband. She loved Mate Nate. He proposed, she accepted, we got married. Off we went to seminary to fulfill the family destiny.

I was shocked and disappointed to discover that marriage did not solve my porn problem. I actually rationalized my porn use in college. I decided it was time to loosen up, join the 20th Century; that all that guilt was really just the residue of an overly puritanical upbringing. I needed to get comfortable with my body, I needed some sex education, what better place to get it from than porn?

I rationalized my porn use during my college years as practice for marriage. Not knowing I was actually poisoning my marriage, I was allowing pornography to set expectations for marriage that no woman on the planet could fulfill. So the problem didn't go away; it metastasized. Then it got worse.

I came out of class one day to see a poster on a wall advertising a field trip co-sponsored by the seminary and a group called Women Against Pornography. They would take seminary students and their spouses into New York City, which was about an hour away, into Times Square. This was in the late 1970s when Times Square was a real toilet. They took us so we could see firsthand how women were exploited by the sex business.

I thought this is exactly what I need. If I can just see behind the curtain; if I can just see how bad it is I will surely stop. I took my wife along. I got my first look at hard core pornography, the stuff any eight year old could find in two minutes today on the Internet, as a married man with my wife beside me in the peep show booth. She put the quarter in. Allie was disgusted by what she saw. In that brief moment of clarity I was too. For that moment I could see it was all a sham. But at the same time, it is as though somewhere deep inside me a door swung open. It wasn't too long after that that I found myself slipping away from home and from seminary, driving down into Trenton, New Jersey in search of a supplier for my new drug. Because baby, I had found my drug.

I don't know if you know this or not, but pornography stimulates that same pleasure centers in the brain that cocaine does. Over time it alters the brain the same way cocaine does. You can see it in brain scans. The brain scans of sex addicts and coke addicts are virtually identical. My wife saw me slipping away emotionally. She didn't know what it was. She couldn't explain it. She thought it was her. That seemed like a good explanation for me. I went with that.

Years passed, and pornography took me places I never intended to go. Before I know it we were living in South Florida. I am a pastor. We have three kids. I am picking up my first hooker on my way to lead the candlelight service on Christmas Eve. I hadn't intended to do it. I knew I would never do that. That was a line I would never cross. That was real unfaithfulness. Pornography was something else. But I had to go early to church. Allie would follow later with the kids. Driving East on Broward Boulevard, it is a blustery cold December day. It starts to rain. I see a lone female figure walking along the sidewalk. I do what I think is the chivalrous thing. I have no idea what she is doing until she is in the car propositioning me. She wanted \$20. I had \$20 in my

wallet. It was supposed to go to the offering. That \$20 never saw the offering plate. That was the worst night I had ever experienced.

During the service, to the strains of the sacred music, the flickering light of the candles, looking out at my wife, my kids, the congregation who loved and trusted me, knowing what I had done and worse, knowing that I was going to do it again. I told myself, I told God I wouldn't, but it wasn't too many days after that, that I found myself driving back down into Ft. Lauderdale. I did it again and again.

I was very careful I was never caught. The strain of the double life was enormous. I hated my own hypocrisy. I woke up on my thirtieth birthday knowing I couldn't keep this up. I was going to get caught. Well-known preachers were getting caught. I wasn't well-known yet but I was building a good reputation in South Florida. Good enough that I would sell enough newspapers when they caught me. That scared me to death.

I knew at that point I was either going to have to quit the behavior or quit the ministry. At that point there was only one thing I could quit. I bailed on the ministry. I told everybody I was burned out. I had no idea what I was going to do. My wife was scared to death. I was too. One day I was driving, cruising in the family station wagon, cruising being the operative word. The radio was on tuned to a motivational station – all self-help all the time. I was grasping at straws. The guy on the radio said this. Are you afraid to go to that job interview? Are you afraid you won't get the job? I have a solution for you. Don't go. Send somebody else. Here is what I mean. The people who are hiring know exactly what they are looking for. They wrote a description of that person. Read the description, create that person and send him to the interview.

I thought I can do this. I have been doing this my whole life. For the first time I consciously created a new persona. MagNate: the business guy. And it worked. I got a job within a few weeks and within a year in a half I was a partner in an engineering firm. I had never had an engineering course in my life. I then had the misfortune to make a lot of money. It is not something an addict should ever have. There was even less accountability than I had in the ministry. I had an unlimited expense account. There was nobody asking for receipts. I could set my own schedule. I could travel whenever I said I needed to. With all that freedom my life got smaller and smaller.

I have done my best to reconstruct it and as far as I can determine I spent \$300,000 on porn and hookers. That is not the worst part. I spent my kids' childhood. I spent 20 years of my wife's life. I spent 20 years of my life trading my birthright day after day for a bowl of beans.

But I never missed church. The Sunday after I left the ministry we were at church. I was active there, too. I sang on the worship team, I taught Sunday School, led youth group and filled in for the preacher when he was in town. I loved church. St. Nate could breathe church. It was tough having to fight my way to a sense of forgiveness – but I could get there. St. Nate could breathe at church. I just couldn't get him to breathe on his own for very long outside the building. I felt horrible about that.

I remember so many times pulling away from some whore house or adult bookstore or strip club somewhere banging on the steering wheel and screaming at God. Take this away. I don't want to do this any more. You can fix me. Fix me. He never answered that prayer. At least not in the

way I wanted. I concluded either He didn't care or He didn't exist. I preferred to think He didn't care. He did care and He did hear and answer. This is how it happened.

Fifteen years ago, we are living in Ft. Lauderdale and I am working in Tampa as a trial consultant in a big construction defect case, coordinating all the expert testimony. The rest of the team was staying a four star hotel next to the federal courthouse. I am staying at a flea bag motel at the edge of town between two strip clubs not getting much sleep.

I came out of court Friday. My wife called. She heard from our oldest son and his wife. They called with the news they are expecting their first grandchild. They decided to move to middle Tennessee because that is the best place in the country to raise kids, and they wanted to know if we would consider moving too, to be close to the baby. Allie, who is by this time in clinical depression, says, "I want to go." I caught a flight to Nashville, drove down to the little town of Franklin where our kids were going to settle. Within a couple days I put an offer down on a house – the only house in town I could afford. Even though I was making lots of money I never seemed to have any money. One of the big mysteries about Nate Larkin was where did all the money go? In just a couple of months we moved. Suddenly the obsession lifted. It was amazing. We are buying furniture, hanging curtains, holding hands, walking to church, we are kids again. I thought "Wow. All that time the problem was Florida!"

But then we started running out of money. When that happened I started to get scared. When that happened I reached for the only fear medication I had ever used. Late at night after Allie had fallen asleep I slipped out of our bedroom, went back into the study, fired up the computer and started downloading porn – because now, I had broadband. I think the young guys don't appreciate the way how the Internet had changed the game in pornography. Back in the 70s porn was hard to find. You had to go looking for it. Now, porn is looking for you. Vast amounts of it delivered free of charge in the privacy and anonymity of you own home, office or automobile. There was an endless supply. An endless variety of virtual sex partners in full motion video that we now know overwhelms the higher portions of the brain where our critical thinking takes place and where moral decisions are made.

Time disappeared. I don't know how long I was there, and suddenly I looked up and my wife was standing there. I hadn't even heard her come in. She had a look of shocked incomprehension. She didn't say anything she just turned and left. I quickly shut everything down, followed her into the bedroom. I was apologizing and explaining, promising and begging. It was a very long night. In the end, she forgave me.

A couple of weeks later she found a condom on the floor of the bathroom that I couldn't quite explain. This time she didn't cry. She sat me down on the edge of the bed and said, "I'm done. I still love you but I don't like you. I don't trust you, I don't respect you and I don't think you can ever change." With those words, she changed me – she saved my life.

Four out of five guys who seek help for sexually compulsive behavior only do so after receiving an ultimatum from a wife or girlfriend. I am one of the four. I knew if there was any hope at all for me to salvage my marriage I would have to do something I had never done before. I would have to tell someone and I would have to get help. Interestingly, I didn't go to the church for help. Church didn't feel safe. I went back to the computer, called up the Alta Vista search engine. This is pre-Google days. I typed in "sex addiction Nashville," hit return and discovered to

my astonishment I had apparently moved to the center of the universe for sex addiction recovery. There were national organizations, groups, therapists everywhere. I found a phone number, left a message and a few minutes later someone called me back to tell me about a twelve step meeting for sex addicts that was meeting at a church not far away. The meeting was at 7:00. I got there at 6:45 and sat in the parking lot as others pulled up and went inside. I couldn't find the courage to get out of my car. At 7:15 I drove away and spent an hour coming up with a story to tell my wife. I didn't need to bother; she wasn't talking. A week later I went back and was about to drive away for the second time when I saw a guy I recognized from church.

It was just a guy, but I had heard him speak up a couple of time sin men's Bible studies and there was something about him I liked. He seemed very comfortable in his own skin. It didn't seem like he needed to impress me or anyone else. Here was the most striking thing about him. He talked about his sin in the present tense. I followed him inside. What I found in the basement of that church changed my life. Not all at once. It would be another three years, due mostly to my spiritual arrogance, it would be another three years before I came to taste true sexual sobriety but it started that night.

I remember coming out of that building mad, furious, that I had spent a lifetime in church and had never been in a room that safe. I had never heard such honesty in my life. I had never seen such humility, felt such kindness, such compassion, such love. I had never heard Jesus like I heard him in that room in the mouths of a bunch of Samaritans who didn't seem to know His proper name. They kept referring to Him as a higher authority. When the meeting was over, the guy from church said, "If you want I will walk with you for a while." He became my first male friend since childhood.

It turned out I had a lot of things to unlearn. Early on my friend said, "You know, Nate, your biggest problem is that you think sex is your problem." I looked at him like he was crazy. I said, "\$300,000 what do you mean it's not my problem?" He said, "It's a problem – it's a big problem. You have to stop and you can't stop on your own. God is going to have to do it for you, and He is probably going to use us, but if you think just stopping that sexual behavior is going fix you and make you happy, you are crazy. Because sex is not your problem; sex is your favorite solution. It is the medication you use to numb the pain caused by your deeper problems, which by the way, are common to man. You have a lot of repenting to do; a lot of healing. We will talk about sex but that is not what this is about. This is not sin management. We are going to talk about pride, unbelief, fear, anger, resentment, self-centeredness, self-pity. That is where it is going."

Eventually it dawned on me where I had gone wrong. I had grown up an American Christian and in some ways more American than Christian. I had always had a personal relationship with Jesus ever since I was this tall. I was getting saved every summer. But I made the mistake of assuming that that personal relationship was a private one, and I had spent years begging God for a private solution for my private problem. Here is the thing. Jesus offers a personal relationship to every one of His disciples but He never offered anybody a private one. He first said follow Me to two guys, not just one. He quickly added ten more to them, and had them follow Him around together for a couple of years as He taught them the most important thing was to love each other. Whenever he sent them out to minister He sent them out in pairs. As He was preparing to leave He said I am going away now, but I will still be with you under this condition – when two or three of you are gathered in my Name I will be there. Two or three.

I had said I wanted to be released by sexual compulsion but that is not really what I wanted. What I truly wanted was to be morally self-sufficient. That was a request that ran counter to God's best intentions. Jesus came to reconstitute the family of God, to reconcile us to God and to each other. I had always been willing to trust Christ, but I had never been willing to trust the body of Christ. I didn't even believe in the body of Christ. I thought that was a metaphor. I didn't believe Jesus is physically present on this planet in the lives broken people. I believe it today.

The greatest act of surrender I make to Jesus today is to pick up the phone and tell the truth to another member of the body of Christ. It still astonished me how I can dial the number of a guy who I know is as messed up as I am and Jesus answers the phone.

I came to understand over time that addiction is a sickness caused by sin. I spent years agonizing over my guilt, begging God for forgiveness that was already mine because I didn't believe the gospel not knowing my sin had made me sick. I was a prisoner of shame. I actually became physically sick. It was in my body. You could see it in a brain scan. Now God can heal addiction instantly and He occasionally does, but His preferred method is progressive. In the same way he causes a broken bone to mend, a cut to close, an infection to be defeated by a fever that spikes and subsides, that healing process that He designed into the body of Christ is described first in James 5:16. "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed." I don't know how it works. I only know that it works if we are willing to make confession a daily discipline.

Eventually, I can to understand that God had never loved, St. Nate. God didn't even like St. Nate because He didn't make St. Nate. I did. God made me. Jesus died for me. What was missing from my relationship from God all those years was never God, it was me. He would call me, I would send St. Nate. It was the same thing that was missing from all my other relationships. Nobody knew me because I always sent somebody else. Jesus wasn't present in those relationships because He doesn't have relationships with personas, only people.

I will close with this. A couple of years ago my wife and I were talking about the night she caught me. She said, "If you had died right then, I would have been relieved. I wasn't going to kill you but I would not have objected if God did." But she said, "If you died I would have a problem on my hands. I would not have been able to call six close friends to carry your casket." I didn't have six friends. I was well known, but nobody knew me, and she just learned even she didn't know me. Today, because God loves me too much to give me a private solution to my private problem, today that is no longer the case. When I die, and I will die, my family will have no trouble finding six close friends to carry my casket. I will be carried in death by the same men who are carrying me in life. I want you to know. We are going somewhere. Every now and again I turn around to see how far we have come. It is phenomenal.

My challenge to you this morning is this: do you have six guys to carry your casket? If you don't have those guys, please, find those guys. Thanks.