The new narcotic. Morgan Bennett just published an article by this title. The thesis: Neurological research has revealed that the effect of internet pornography on the human brain is just as potent — if not more so — than addictive chemical substances such as cocaine or heroin.

To make matters worse, there are 1.9 million cocaine users, and 2 million heroin users, in the United States compared to 40 million regular users of online pornography.

Here’s why the addictive power of pornography can be worse:

Cocaine is considered a stimulant that increases dopamine levels in the brain. Dopamine is the primary neurotransmitter that most addictive substances release, as it causes a “high” and a subsequent craving for a repetition of the high, rather than a subsequent feeling of satisfaction by way of endorphins.

Heroin, on the other hand, is an opiate, which has a relaxing effect. Both drugs trigger chemical tolerance, which requires higher quantities of the drug to be used each time to achieve the same intensity of effect.

Pornography, by both arousing (the “high” effect via dopamine) and causing an orgasm (the “release” effect via opiates), is a type of polydrug that triggers both types of addictive brain chemicals in one punch, enhancing its addictive propensity.

But, Bennett says, “internet pornography does more than just spike the level of dopamine in the brain for a pleasure sensation. It literally changes the physical matter within the brain so that new neurological pathways require pornographic material in order to trigger the desired reward sensation.”

Think of the brain as a forest where trails are worn down by hikers who walk along the same path over and over again, day after day. The exposure to pornographic images creates similar neural pathways that, over time, become more and more “well-paved” as they are repeatedly traveled with each exposure to pornography. Those neurological pathways eventually become the trail in the brain’s forest by which sexual interactions are routed. Thus, a pornography user has “unknowingly created a neurological circuit” that makes his or her default perspective toward sexual matters ruled by the norms and expectations of pornography.

Not only do these addictive pathways cause us to filter all sexual stimulation through the pornographic fil-
ter; they awaken craving for “more novel pornographic content like more taboo sexual acts, child pornography, or sadomasochistic pornography.”

And it gets worse:

Another aspect of pornography addiction that surpasses the addictive and harmful characteristics of chemical substance abuse is its permanence. While substances can be metabolized out of the body, pornographic images cannot be metabolized out of the brain because pornographic images are stored in the brain’s memory.

“In sum,” Bennett writes, “brain research confirms the critical fact that pornography is a drug delivery system that has a distinct and powerful effect upon the human brain and nervous system.”

None of this takes God by surprise. He designed the interplay between the brain and the soul. Discoveries of physical dimensions to spiritual reality do not nullify spiritual reality.

When Jesus said, “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), he saw with crystal clarity — the way a designer sees his invention — that the physical eye had profound effects on the spiritual “heart.”

And when the Old Testament wise man said in Proverbs 23:7, literally, “As he thinks in his soul, so is he,” he saw with similar clarity that soul acts create being. Thinking in the soul corresponds to “is.” And this “is” includes the body.

In other words, it goes both ways. Physical reality affects the heart. And the heart affects physical reality (the brain). Therefore, this horrific news from brain research about the enslaving power of pornography is not the last word. God has the last word. The Holy Spirit has the greatest power. We are not mere victims of our eyes and our brains. I know this both from Scripture and from experience.