



THE
MENTORING
PROJECT

BREAKING FREE FROM ADDICTION: VICTORY THROUGH CHRIST'S STRENGTH



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Introduction

She never thought her marriage would come to this...

George and Stacy had been married for four years. Their dating and honeymoon were dreamy. Their wedding was the best day of their lives. But as Stacy started to settle into normal life, George started drinking. Even after Stacy confronted him multiple times, the problem never seemed to subside. It only deepened into a dangerous addiction.

Before they had met, George didn't drink much. After he and Stacy were married, however, life picked up and work got tough. George strove to provide for their soon-to-be first child. His boss had a unique knack for putting the pressure on him with unreasonably high expectations at the firm. After stressful days on the job, George would come home and want something to help him settle.

Early on, George only sipped on one drink to take the edge off after a long day. But one drink a night quickly became four or five.

Stacy wasn't terribly worried initially, until the first time George cursed at her, raising his voice in anger. Not only that, but George's new pattern included lying about how much he'd had. He even hid the bottles and attempted to mask the smell of his breath before crashing into bed.

Stacy wants help. Believe it or not, George wants help also. They're both professing Christians who regularly attend a good, Bible-believing church. They know this isn't how life is supposed to be. They want to break free from addiction and find new life in Christ. George and Stacy are also not alone...

Whether it be alcohol, pornography, pills, gambling, gaming, social media, entertainment, exercise, eating, sugar, sex, work, or thousands of other possibilities, addiction is a topic that impacts nearly everyone's life.

As biblical counseling professor and pastor, John Henderson, put it, "rarely do people *choose* to be addicted to created things. Rather, we choose to place our hope, joy, and peace in created things, and then we become addicted. We run to created things as false refuges and false gods. An addiction is the inevitable result."¹

If we want to break free from addiction, or to help someone else do so, we'll have to understand addiction biblically. We need to get a sense of the root causes on the spiritual side of addiction. To undermine addiction, we'll have to understand human experience according to the Bible first. From a Christian point of view, "addiction" is a description, not an explanation. It tells you what is happening, not why. It is the fruit of a root—that root remains to be determined.

¹ John Henderson, *Equipped to Counsel: A Training Course in Biblical Counseling* (The Association of Biblical Counselors, 2019), 260.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. As you begin reading, reflect upon your own life. In what areas or aspects of your life currently do you most relate to George and Stacy's story?
2. With which created things in the list at the top of this page do you find yourself most tempted right now?

Chapter 1: Defining Addiction: What It Is

As we begin discussing the topic of addiction, we need to consider what it is. Illustrations only serve us if we first understand definitions. In what follows, I will outline a biblical understanding of addictions as explained by **voluntary slavery**, a combination of idolatry and spiritual adultery. It may be most helpful to start with a few things addictions are *not*.

A Medical Model

The most dominant way of understanding addictions today is the medical model. In this way of thinking, addictions are diseases. One recent Netflix sitcom diagnosed the problem of excessive alcohol use and addiction to cocaine. After a severe vehicle accident caused by his most recent bender, a man's sympathetic brother exclaimed in the hospital room, "He has an addiction—okay?! It's a disease. It's like AIDS!" The afflicted brother replied, "No, no, it's not like AIDS; it's like cancer." In either view, addiction is a disease.

But, we aren't guilty for sickness, since sickness comes upon us through no fault of our own. Addictions as diseases require medicalized treatment, including the right combination of therapy, detox and rehab, and anti-addiction medication regimes. Cravings count largely as automatic, physiological impulses trained by exposure to abused substances. One increasingly popular example of this way of thinking includes the group meetings and 12-step program of *Alcoholics Anonymous*. And no doubt, there are important biological and sociological components worthy of careful consideration with respect to addictions.

A Worship Disorder

However, in a biblical paradigm, the disease model merely describes some aspects of the human experience of addiction. It does not explain or sufficiently account for the primary motivations of human beings. Not diseases, but desires—deep-seated, long-standing, life-dominating desires—deserve careful consideration, if we want to understand addiction. Biblically considered, "cravings" are spiritual, not just biological, physiological, or chemical. Likewise, though withdrawal symptoms express themselves physically, their root is spiritual, religious, and theological. For this reason, addictions do not merely involve the body, but also *the soul*.

Considered holistically, addictions are not merely a psychological disorder, but a worship disorder. We'll have to learn to translate human experience into religious terms to see this. As John Henderson reminds us, "the Bible doesn't use the terms addiction or substance abuse. Instead, Scripture speaks of a person's slavery to sin (John 8:34; Romans 6:6–20), disposition to continual evil (Genesis 6:5; Psalm 140:2; Nahum 3:19), and depravity of mind producing unbridled, sinful passions (Romans 1:18–32). Scripture tells story after story of people being ruled by their physical and spiritual passions. Scripture

speaks often about idolatries of human hearts and their consequences (Deuteronomy 5–6; Ezekiel 14). Addictions can be viewed as one of these consequences, the results of the flesh ruling a person’s life.”²

Addictions take root in the human heart as people rest their hope, trust, and joy in something other than God, which the Bible calls idolatry. In the Bible, however, idolatry is both innate and acquired, both natural and learned. It’s both nature and nurture. We practice idolatry from birth, especially by falling in love with something other than our Creator. Yet, we also imitate the idolatrous ways of life we observe as examples, especially those of our parents, siblings, and other influential social groups. Addiction occurs when false gods (or idols) become rulers over us. We worship and serve them in thought, word, and deed. Our desires and our behavior conform to their mastery over us.

A Biblical Definition

Attempting to take all of this into account, we can now consider a fuller definition for addictions:

Addiction is when inordinate and idolatrous desires, satisfied and frustrated over time, result in the personal sensation of dependence and patterns of destructive behavior.

In order to break free from addictions, let’s first break down this definition. **Inordinate** desires are stronger than they should be. They are out of place in the order of our loves, higher than something else we should love more. Inordinate desires in your life could look like accruing wealth with a wilting family, time on social media to the neglect of your day job, overindulgence in sugary snacks regardless of your current diet and exercise routine, compulsive shopping with disregard for the household budget, career-minded workaholism, chasing a particular body image or physical appearance, binge-watching all the newest shows, excessive hours gaming or YouTubing while forsaking appropriate sleep, and much more.

For a desire to be **idolatrous**, it must supplant God, replacing Him with something He made, expressed in a life of false worship. We may tend in our sophisticated and scientific age to think idolatry no longer threatens us, but we’d be sorely mistaken according to the Bible. Even in ancient Israel, idols were a matter of the heart (Ezekiel 14:3). Heart idolatry doesn’t always mean attending a temple or bowing down before a block of wood. It could take place at a sporting event or in a conference room. Idolatry involves us turning away from God to find our hope and trust, fear and dreams in something other than Him.

Desires become addictions when they oscillate for extended time between **satisfaction and frustration**. A pattern of feeling satisfied and frustrated fuels the human heart’s descent into addiction. Such patterns carry along the experience of addiction. Commonly called “cravings,” such experiences are real. They feel like an itch that won’t go away, no matter how much the spot is scratched. While the craving for the first drink may seem easy to avoid, subsequent craving becomes much more complicated and difficult if indulged.

² Henderson, *Equipped to Counsel*, 256.

Though, biblically considered, the physical body can't cause us to sin, influences can *feel* like determining factors at times. Like throwing more wood on top of a fire, the third drink often feeds and fuels the fourth. Since the craving seems to subside only but for a moment, such frustration fuels the search for satisfaction all over again, into a seemingly endless cycle. For this reason, a **personal sense of dependence** tends to accompany the experience of addiction. It feels like life won't go on without the drug, drink, delicacy or other object of desire.

In order to defend that object of desire, **patterns of destructive behavior** emerge. Lies, deceit, blame shifting, manipulation, oppressive behavior, and damaged trust and relationships surround addicted persons. Your life can take on all sorts of twisted shapes to protect against losing what you love. Like armed guards in a children's school or like Gollum with the ring of power, no cost is too high to protect what's prized as precious.

A Moral Model

In sum, again, addiction is when inordinate and idolatrous desires, satisfied and frustrated over time, result in the personal sensation of dependence and patterns of destructive behavior.

Given the limitations of the medical model, we need a **moral model** for understanding addiction. Because, biblically considered, human sin is both a state of affairs and a series of actions. Sin is not only external actions, but also defiled internal desires (Romans 7:7–25, Ephesians 4:17–24, Colossians 3:5-10, James 1:13–15, Galatians 5:16–24). What this means for us is that “addiction” describes human experience, but it does not explain it. While addiction is a fruit, idolatry and spiritual adultery are roots.

For this reason, biblical counselor Ed Welch defines addiction as “bondage to the rule of a substance, activity, or state of mind, which then becomes the center of life, defending itself from the truth so that even bad consequences don't bring repentance, and leading to further estrangement from God.”³ In the biblical paradox, addiction is done by us *and* done to us. Welch helpfully clarifies, “in sin, we are both hopelessly out of control and shrewdly calculating; victimized yet responsible. All sin is simultaneously pitiable slavery and overt rebelliousness or selfishness.”⁴

Like a captive turned fugitive, we are victimized yet responsible. In the next chapter, we will discuss how addiction works and what this responsible-victim-dynamic looks like.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What are the limitations of a medical model for understanding addictions? How does the moral model in our biblical definition shed further light on our experience?

³ Edward T. Welch, *Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 35.

⁴ Welch, *Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave*, 34.

2. How can you be both victimized and responsible? If this dynamic resonates with your experience, share your story with a close, Christian friend.
3. In what ways does the biblical doctrine of sin, as described in the last section above, shape our approach to helping others fight addictions?

Chapter 2: Describing Addiction: How It Works

In 1974, Patricia Hearst was kidnapped. She lived in California, as the granddaughter of the famous publisher William Randolph Hearst. Her abduction was quickly claimed by the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA), a radical left-wing group, engaged in urban guerrilla warfare. For nineteen months, the SLA held Hearst in captivity.

Two months after her abduction, Hearst announced her newfound sympathy for her captor's aims. She adopted a new name, Tania, in an audiotape released to inform the media of her change of allegiance. Only days later, surveillance video revealed Hearst robbing a bank with the SLA. She yelled profanity-laden commands at frightened bank customers. During the robbery, two men entering the bank suffered gunshot wounds from the SLA. Only a month later, Hearst herself emptied an entire magazine of gun fire, while threatening the manager of a local sporting goods store over a minor theft.

How had 19-year old Patricia Hearst gone from captive to fugitive in only a few months? Stockholm syndrome—or at least, that's why most people know this story. For many, Hearst has served as the clearest case of affections so detached from reality and so darkly distorted as to involve falling in love with one's captor, also known as Stockholm syndrome.

Admittedly, the term remains controversial due to the complex relationship between details of such traumatic experiences. Yet, perhaps the atrocity captures well some of the complexities of addiction. Consider how painful and difficult it must be to contemplate leaving the one you've come to love, yet, your desire to stay reveals how much you've changed!

Stories of such twisted affections for captors serve as a helpful picture of how the Bible judges the human experience of addiction. It's a vivid picture of what it looks like when we become *addicted* to something that takes the place of our Maker, who means to be our only Master. Becoming addicted to a substance, an activity, or a state of mind looks a lot like the transformation of Patricia Hearst into SLA member Tania.

The Path to Addiction: An Idolatry-Adultery Paradigm

Addiction is **voluntary slavery**. It's a chosen bondage. Somewhere along the way, we lose ourselves in love for a lesser lord. Becoming addicted is falling in love with something that's killing you, and, simultaneously, being radically changed by it. Biblically considered, addiction describes a life ruled by a false god (or an idol), taken as a (false) lover in spiritual adultery. Addiction derives from a combination of idolatry and spiritual adultery rooted in the human heart. Let's briefly unpack this biblical **idolatry-adultery paradigm** as a means of describing addiction.

Idolatry

Idolatry is an exchange of God for something else, which results in a life under the lordship of a false god. Idolatry involves the worship of the creation rather than the Creator (Romans 1:18–23). And yet,

such worship is expressed in thought, word, and deed (Romans 1:24–32; Galatians 5:19–21). For, all who worship idols become like them (Psalm 115:8, 135:15–18). In the Bible, not all idols are made from blocks of wood; some idols are idols of the heart (Ezekiel 14:1–7).

Our attraction and submission to idols, however, is a *process*. The Bible portrays turning from God for idols as adultery (Proverbs 7, James 4:1–6). Spiritual adultery ignites and directs idolatry. For this reason, Ed Welch portrayed addiction as “a banquet in the grave.”⁵ Therefore, the stages of spiritual adultery serve to illuminate the stages of addiction. Let’s consider the path to addiction, which grows from acquaintance to friendship to infatuation to obsession to (false) worship.⁶

Acquaintance

Idolatry begins gradually. All it takes is an acquaintance. It begins as a like or repost on social media. It begins in one shot glass. It begins with that first bite before the binge. It says, “Sure, I’ll try it!” At first, it’s just a small toke, maybe that first long drag.

Friendship

Idolatry grows from friendship with created things. It says, “my night’s always better with it!” It thinks, “I am still in control.” It’s the first two weekends of two drinks per night. It’s the lack of inhibition to do it a third time. It’s when the cigar leads to several cigarettes. It’s when second-hand marijuana smoke intoxicates enough to become first-hand experience. Ultimately, this stage is when truth and experience diverge into two separate roads.

Infatuation

Idolatry eventually turns into infatuation. The feeling of admiration swirls, even when the substance is distant. Life is planned around hits—life is barely even lived between them. In this stage, blame shifting swells. Everything is *their* fault; nothing is mine. Excuses become relational currency. Promises are made as quickly as they are broken, and they litter conversations. Even bad consequences can’t turn the addict from her ways at this point. For, she says, “I can’t imagine my night without it!”

Obsession

Infatuation can quickly become obsession. Here we find the full-on feeling of dependence. Now, it’s, “I can’t *live* without it.” Frequency of addictive events is at an all-time high, perhaps even daily. The volume is so loud that everything else is drowned out, nothing else is desired. Addictions never lack sincerity. Using can even become selling at this stage, for example.

⁵ Welch, *Addictions*, 57.

⁶ I have modified and followed Ed Welch’s paradigm here. For more, see Welch, *Addictions*, 65–83.

Adultery

Since the descent into addiction follows the course of spiritual adultery, love, betrayal, jealousy, and paranoia characterize the final stages well. The conscience can become seared (1 Timothy 4:1–2). The dark path to addiction ends in life-dominating worship of a false god, the exchange of the Creator for created things. At this point, you are a slave to your circumstances. You have chosen to give up freedom and choices to serve another master (John 8:34). In a picture, it's voluntary slavery or chosen bondage. In a word, it's idolatry.

The Descent into Addiction

Understood in this way, each of us can appreciate the descent into addiction personally. For everyone knows something of the experience of inordinate and idolatrous desires. In fact, if drunkenness remains a blueprint for all addictions, then the Bible simply lists it alongside other sins (Galatians 5:21). Remember, *any* activity, substance or state of mind can become addictive in our hands, whether alcohol, drugs, food, sex, entertainment, spending sprees, sports betting, collectibles, revenge, power and control, or glory and fame.

While those suffering under addictions may feel their struggle is unique, there is great comfort in the biblical view that we all suffer and struggle in similar ways (1 Corinthians 10:13). After all, addicts are, in an important sense, *all of us*. For, all of us are idolaters from birth and by practice.

If the path to addiction develops along stages from acquaintance to adultery, then the cycle of addiction involves achieving pleasure and avoiding pain. A cruel master captures our affections by controlling our attention and then shapes our actions. Even our ambitions become distorted and dragged along according to our new allegiance. While cravings may initially feel distant, denied without difficulty, they soon become apparently insatiable after repeated use.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. If the descent into addiction is a captive-fugitive dynamic, which angle do you tend to emphasize more, and why? How does balancing the two help you understand your situation? How does it provide practical help and hope?
2. Where would you say you are on the path to addiction outlined above with regard to alcohol or substance abuse? Gaming or gambling? Pornography or other sexual immorality? What other created thing threatens you most, and how would you map out your struggle with it right now?

Chapter 3: Delaying Addiction: Making Space to Begin the Fight

Having understood the avenue of addiction, we can now consider the cure. In short, it's what the Scottish Presbyterian preacher Thomas Chalmers called "the expulsive power of a new affection."⁷ In other words, new and stronger desires drive out old desires. Only attention to the heart in this way will finally and fully defeat addiction. For whatever rules the heart rules the life (Proverbs 4:23). If you want to defeat addiction, you'll have to deal with your heart.

Simple "stop it!" strategies shortchange the seriousness of this struggle. Only heart change yields true freedom from addiction. Yet, many people need to take temporary, practical measures to clear a path for tending the heart. As such, a short season of stop gaps may be necessary first. I urge you to consider three stop gaps below as a means of taking care of your heart.

Yet, these are only stop gaps. They are temporary. They serve as a means to another, more important end: tending your heart. If you want to grow herbs and spices in your home garden, sometimes you have to pull weeds first. If you want to see out of your house clearly, sometimes you have to clean the windows first. If you want to think clearly, sometimes you have to take a Tylenol for your headache first.

That means these next three measures won't fully deal with addiction by themselves. They are sometimes necessary, but they are never sufficient. To put it plainly, people with a porn problem have not addressed that problem simply by installing accountability software like Covenant Eyes. Hopefully, they've put some distance between them and their sin. That's often a necessary first step, because it can create space to deal with the heart (Hebrews 12:12–13). Yet, the most important part is yet to be done! Thus, the next and final chapter aims for the heart, but first some stop gaps.

Stop Gap #1: Accountability

First, establish **accountability** wherever there's availability. If you have access to engage in addictive activities, ensure you have accountability also. You must consider the circumstances of your struggles. Search for patterns. Does the shape of your life reveal any recurring sinful tendencies? This stop gap includes the places you find yourself during the day, the relationships in every area of your life, the times you feel most tempted, and more. It could even include your drive home from work...

Jim threatened to destroy his life with pornography. Things escalated one day on his way home from work. He pulled into the parking lot of a local strip club, stopped the car, and started to get out. But as soon as Jim heard the door unlatch after pulling on the handle, he also heard his phone ring. Caleb was calling.

Caleb was a co-worker. He knew Jim's routine trip home from work passed by that dark and twisted establishment. He also knew about Jim's struggle with pornography. The two were members of the

⁷ Thomas Chalmers, *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

same church, and they had committed to radical honesty and transparency with regard to sin struggles. Jim wanted to walk in the light. He told Caleb everything a week ago. Sadly, this wasn't the first time Jim was tempted to stop. The two had taken the practical step of sharing each other's location and setting up a ping whenever certain geofences were crossed. That's why Caleb called.

Do whatever it takes to make it more difficult to step into sin. Whatever afflicts you, whether an activity or a substance, wherever it's accessible, you need to take steps of accountability. Sometimes, a relationship with a dear friend saves your life.

Other times, technology enables us to pursue holiness more easily than sin. Fearing they waste too much time with entertainment, two friends of mine recently subscribed to the Brick device. With a tap of their phone on this small gray block stuck to their fridge, the phone locks them out of apps they've chosen to avoid for a time.

Other friends have deleted social media accounts altogether, for it is better to go to heaven with no social network than to go to hell while staying up-to-date on what's happening with all of your digital friends (Matthew 5:29–30). Of course, I don't mean to imply that all social media implicates us in sin. I have certain social media accounts. Social media isn't the problem; my sinful heart is the problem. Sin is so deceitful that radical measures are necessary to fight it. Establish accountability wherever there's availability.

Stop Gap #2: Plan

Second, build a **rescue plan**. This second practical stop gap, unlike the last, creates self-accountability without the immediate assistance of others. If you want to break free from addiction, you will need to reorient your entire life. Since addictions are rooted in deep-seated, long-standing, life-dominating desires, you need to consider the shape of your entire life. You may even need to restructure your entire life.

It's often said, "time heals all wounds." But that's not true. The change of time alone does not change the human heart. We should not expect a change for the good without great physical effort, intellectual energy, and consistent discipline. No one becomes holy by accident. Spiritual growth requires diligent use of the God-given means of grace, including the Scriptures, meditation, self-examination, self-denial, watchfulness, and prayer.

Rachel oscillated from depriving herself of enough food for nourishment to bingeing and purging to preserve the body image she desperately desired. She also realized her problem was more than she could bear. In God's kind providence, He had put her in a healthy church. Rachel requested help from the wife of one of her pastors, a godly older saint in the congregation, and a young woman Rachel had been discipling for the last few years. Together, the four came up with a diet and nutrition plan specific to Rachel. They all accompanied Rachel to her doctor's appointment to approve the plan. For the first 21 days, Rachel would record all of her food via an app on her smartphone. Her faithful friends also

regularly checked in by sending text messages for prayer, Scriptural encouragement, and accountability. Seeing each other on Sundays alone was not sufficient for this struggle.

We all need a plan for spiritual growth. You can create specific, measurable, attainable goals for your spiritual growth. Career-minded people do this at work intuitively—why not do it with the most important matters? Do it with a close friend in your church, or preferably, with a pastor. There is wisdom in many counselors (Proverbs 11:14, 15:22). More importantly, God gives wisdom when we ask (James 1:5). God will help us be holy if we'll draw upon His vast strength.

As you prayerfully discern your life, consider your own path to addiction. Read back through the path to addiction in the last chapter and consider: Where have you become acquainted with addictive substances? Where have you made friends with activities or states of mind to which you're becoming addicted? When do you find yourself infatuated or obsessed with the idols of your heart?

In your plan, build specific roadblocks between stages on your path to addiction. For example, delete your dealer's phone number. Additionally, if you're attentive to your inner life, you will find your mind moving from thought to plan to execution. So, at each stage, make it practically harder for yourself to take the next step.

Stop Gap #3: Medicine

Depending on the severity of your situation, you may find medical help a practical necessity. Given the scope of addictions as we've considered them here (from, for example, social media to cocaine) this final stop gap obviously does not apply to everyone evenly. Let me lay out some principles for considering medical help here.

First, medicine can be a good gift of God. Jesus assumes sick people ought to get help from doctors (Matthew 9:12). Paul encourages Timothy to treat his physical problems with a new dietary regimen (1 Timothy 5:23). Biblically considered, Christians need not swear off medicine in all forms.

Second, medicine must remain in its proper place. While doctors treat the body with specialized training to address physical symptoms, few attend to the broader cares of human souls. In fact, sometimes, doctors can make matters much worse by nature of their field (Mark 5:25–26). Remember the limitations of the medical model for addictions as we discussed above.

Third, churches cannot cross over outside appropriate territory. As a pastor, medicine is not in my jurisdiction. It would not be in my pastoral purview to give counsel about increasing or decreasing medications, diagnosing and treating various medical issues. The best course of action, especially in extreme cases, will be a pastor and a medical professional (or better, a team of each!) working holistically to care for the sufferer together.

In view of those three principles, perhaps a picture illumines why I've called medical help a stop gap for our purposes. Consider a broken leg. Walking on a broken leg makes matters worse. For a season, a cast or crutches or even a wheelchair helps rehabilitate the leg. Yet, we must never lose sight of the goal—getting the leg working properly again! You must stop walking normally for a season *so that* you might walk normally again soon! This pattern is how medical help ought to work. More important than avoiding such helps is simply keeping them in perspective. Medical help clears the ground to deal with the heart. It provides temporary relief to make way for the long-term.

That means sobriety *alone* is an insufficient goal. *Only* “getting clean” ignores the heart! Thus, sobriety is a means to an end: glorifying God by tending the heart to trust in Christ alone, which we'll turn to in the next section.

For these reasons, severe cases of addiction may find help from 30-day retreats or rehabilitation centers with specialization in their area of addiction. That being said, if you're considering a program, look into what they believe and teach about God, the Bible, and humanity. You don't want to submit yourself to a program which undermines the path to true freedom through false teaching (Galatians 1:6–10).

One word of caution about medical detox/withdrawal: If you find yourself suffering with an addiction to alcohol or benzodiazepines (e.g., Valium, Xanax, etc.), self-detox without professional medical interventions could have severe consequences and can even prove fatal. You *should* consult with a physician or a specialty organization if that describes your situation.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Has this chapter challenged your understanding of accountability and/or medicine at all? If so, how? If not, how did it strengthen your convictions by rooting them more directly in the Bible?
2. If you were to build out a practical rescue plan for yourself, what would it look like in light of the above?
3. Did anyone specifically come to mind as you've read about the people in this book? How could you reach out to encourage or help them?

Chapter 4: Defeating Addiction: Where to Find Freedom

The only sure way to break free from addiction is finding strength in Christ's victory. The above stop gaps (and like measures) are merely meant to create space for the long-term tending of our hearts to know and fear the Lord. Remember, addiction is a fruit whereas idolatry and spiritual adultery are the roots. Thus, we must dig up bad roots in the heart in order to remove bad fruit from our lives. Then, tending the heart, good roots can be planted in their place by the grace of God in Christ.

The only affection powerful enough to expel addiction comes from seeing and savoring Jesus Christ. When we see Jesus as sweet, we'll do what He says. Only by growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ should we expect to break free from addiction (2 Peter 3:18). Though we have been mastered by sin and selfish desires, we need to put on the Lord Jesus and make no provision for the flesh (Romans 13:14; cf. 6:1–23, 8:13). The rest of this chapter outlines how we might do this, by God's grace. Seven Scriptural strategies follow, after a crucial precondition.

Precondition: Christ Alone

The presupposition of this entire subject is that we have sinned and separated ourselves from God through disobedience and rebellion. This is why we suffer from addictions and struggle with sin. But the good news of the Christian gospel is that through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we can be forgiven of our sins, restored to fellowship with God, and given everlasting life.

We receive God's grace through faith alone in Christ alone. We take hold of Christ by knowing this good news, agreeing that it's true, and trusting in Christ alone for forgiveness, righteousness, salvation, and wisdom. We benefit from Christ by having him as Savior and Lord, Prophet, Priest, and King. He is God's Word to us. He is God's sacrifice for us. He is God's rule over us. He is God's blessing to us.

Before we can do anything for Jesus, we need Him to be everything for us. Without Him, we can do nothing (John 15:5). Like all of the people in the Bible, from Adam to Noah to Abraham to Moses to David and all the others (except Jesus), we have failed to keep God's commandments. We have sinned. We have broken the covenant God made with us since creation. If we would be free from sin and struggle, there is only one way out.

Only if Christ passes the test where we have all failed, only if he wins the victory, can we overcome our struggles by His grace through faith.

Therefore, if you don't know the Lord Jesus Christ by faith, repent of your sins and trust in Christ alone. Become a Christian, or don't expect freedom from addiction. Without true faith in Christ, we simply swap one idol for another. As a result, "free" addicts may sadly find they become enslaved to something else all over again! If you are a Christian, seven Scriptural strategies follow for breaking free from addiction by Christ's victory.

1. Consider your situation soberly

The reference to sobriety here has more to do with what the Bible calls “being sober-minded” (1 Peter 1:13). We could extend this idea into getting clean from substance or alcohol abuse. Obviously, you will think more clearly when you are not coming off your last binge. However, to be truly free from addiction, you must begin by considering your situation thoughtfully and seriously.

One of Satan’s schemes against struggling saints convinces them their sin is unforgivable and undefeatable (2 Corinthians 2:11). Central to this scheme is the supposition that we are unique. If what you’re going through is utterly unlike anyone and everyone else, then there’s not much hope that you can change. Sadly, those struggling with addiction suffer from this thought process more than most.

But there is great comfort in God’s Word for struggling saints. “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Corinthians 10:13). We are not unique. Our struggle is not unique. There is comfort in this reality. Our brothers and sisters’ examples of victories ought to give us confidence that God will deliver us too. There is a way of escape. God Himself provides it.

Recognizing this reality is part of considering your situation soberly. Another part is acknowledging that loving the world and loving God are mutually exclusive (1 John 2:15–17). You must see your struggle against addiction as a spiritual struggle with the highest of stakes.

Tragically, many struggling with addiction refuse help because they believe the lie that only those with similar experiences understand. But God knows, and His Word is true. He often helps us through others who struggle in different ways. Along these lines, it is helpful to confess not only external sins, but internal temptations as well. In the Bible, our sins come from temptations which arise from evil desires (James 1:13–15). As Ed Welch wrote, “James makes it clear that the desire for anything that Scripture prohibits is an evil desire that comes from our own hearts.”⁸ Thus, we should confess our temptations to one another that we might see sin soberly and strive to root it out of our lives.

2. Cultivate stronger desires through Scripture

We meet God in Christ through Scripture (John 5:39). We live by God’s Word (Matthew 4:4). Scripture itself is alive as the living Word of God (Hebrews 4:12). We should never think of Scripture as a static, boring, dead letter. It lives. It gives us life. God uses the Bible to put spiritual steel in our spines. Through Scripture, we draw upon God’s vast strength. Meditation upon Scripture massages the truth into our hearts, creating and cultivating stronger desires that displace weaker desires for the things of the world.

Consider God’s Word in Psalm 84: “For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness. For the Lord God

⁸ Welch, *Addictions*, 230.

is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favor and honor. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly” (84:10–11).

This truth is the hope we need. It’s the help addicts need. Only trust that God’s Word is true creates a desire stronger than anything else. God is so delightful, that a single day with Him is more desirable than a thousand times the alternative. Serving God is so satisfying that the position of lowest honor with God (unlocking and opening the doors—the ancient equivalent of janitorial service) is better than ruling another kingdom.

Not only that, but “the Lord God is a sun and shield.” He provides illumination and protection. The same can’t be said for the objects of our addiction, of course. Alcohol abuse steals favor and dishonors, but the Lord grants favor and honor. In fact, God is good and does good. He doesn’t withhold good from those who love and worship Him because of His grace.

Scripture is indispensable to spiritual growth out of voluntary slavery to addiction. Why? Because a young man keeps his way pure by guarding his heart according to God’s Word (Psalm 119:9). If we want to avoid sinning against God, then we must store up God’s Word in our hearts (Psalm 119:11). Memorization, recitation, and meditation are invaluable ingredients to cultivate stronger desires for God in Christ. How will you store up God’s Word in your heart?

3. Get a glimpse of the greatness of God

God alone satisfies the desires of the human heart. Because God alone created us. We cultivate love for God by recognizing His creating work. The Bible ascribes glory and honor to the Lord God because of His power in creating all things (Revelation 4:11). Our problems stem from confusing the Creator with His creation.

When Christians throughout history called God sufficient or all-sufficient, what they had in mind was how God differs from everything that He made. God is holy, holy, holy (Isaiah 6:3; Revelation 4:8). Nothing compares to Him (Isaiah 40:18). No one is like Him (1 Samuel 2:2).

God alone is eternal (Psalm 90:2). He has no beginning. He has no end. He does not even experience a succession of moments like we do. Time is created. Therefore, God is outside of time.

God alone is immutable (Malachi 3:6). He does not change (James 1:17). He cannot get better. He cannot get worse. He is perfect (Matthew 5:48). His perfections include his purity, unity, justice, righteousness, holiness, mercy, goodness, grace, and love. God does not change because God cannot stop being or behaving as God. God can improve our situation because we are mercifully mutable. But God cannot change, for change is the language of creatures.

God alone is all-knowing (Isaiah 40:28; Psalm 147:5; Hebrews 4:13; 1 John 3:20). He cannot learn, for He knows all things. As such, He cannot be taken by surprise or caught off guard. He is never unaware. He is never ignorant. He is omniscient.

God alone is independent (Acts 17:24–25). He does not need anything outside Himself. No one and nothing meets His needs. In fact, we could even say, God has no needs. He depends on no one and nothing. He is of Himself, from Himself, and satisfied by Himself. He is sufficient. Thus, God alone satisfies.

This God, the only true and living God, can satisfy you, too. You must do the one thing necessary (Luke 10:42). You must consider God in Christ a more satisfying treasure than anything the world can offer (Hebrews 11:26). You must ask of the LORD to dwell in His house and gaze upon His beauty (Psalm 27:4). Only *then* could your addiction be defeated.

4. Walk in the light

If we have fellowship with God, we will have fellowship with His people—the body of Christ, the church. The apostle John says as much: “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” (1 John 1:7).

At this point, let me just say it plainly, if you’re not a member of a local church, you lack the most practical help in the fight against addiction. Welch reminds us that corporate worship is “the most potent weapon of all for fighting addiction.”⁹ It’s in corporate worship that we find our affections corrected, retrained, stirred, deepened, and shaped. For, here, we praise God, confess our sin before Him, receive His pardon through the public reading of Scripture, give thanks to Him for His works of mercy, grace, and love, hear His instruction through the preached Word of God, and receive a blessing or benediction as we scatter to serve God and our neighbors.

To be clear, not just any church will do. You need a *healthy* local church. You need a church that takes membership seriously. You need a church that takes sin seriously. You need a church that takes God’s Word seriously.

Find a church where the Word of God is preached faithfully week by week, where words like “sin” and “repentance” are used often in the pulpit, where pastors know who the members of the congregation are, where those who walk in darkness are not given a safe place to stay hidden forever.

Weak preaching and wimpy fellowship will not help you battle addiction. You want to surround yourself with people who speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15–16). Find a place you can be fully known and fully loved. One practical tool in this regard is the online Church Search at 9Marks.org.

⁹ Welch, *Addictions*, 86.

5. Reconcile relationships

If you have given in to addiction, broken relationships will be scattered all over your life. You need to reconcile with those you've offended (Matthew 5:23–24; Colossians 3:13; Ephesians 4:32). You'll do this by taking personal responsibility for the damage you've done.

Ask for forgiveness. Be specific. Say something like, "I should not have lied to you. I owe you the truth. God is truth, so starting today, I will be radically honest. Help me walk in integrity." Tragically, lies and deceit have characterized your life, so let truth and transparency take their place now (Ephesians 4:25). Say what you mean, and mean what you say (Matthew 5:37). You've put the blame on others, so now it's time to take personal responsibility. You will need to initiate this step of reconciliation. It will not happen without intentionality.

You may also find this particular step takes time. Reconciliation is complicated. Restoring trust can be slow and difficult. For practical wisdom and help in this important endeavor, see Garrett Kell's booklet on *Forgiveness* for The Mentoring Project.

6. Learn self-control

Remarkably, in Titus 2, Paul gives a job to everyone in the church: the older men, the older women, the younger women, and the younger men. All kinds of people receive a number of things to do, except one group gets only one thing to focus upon. "Likewise, urge the younger men to be self-controlled" (2:6). And in fact, each of Paul's four groups receive the command to learn self-control in one way or another. The older women are not to be "slaves to much wine" (2:3). The older men are to be "self-controlled" (2:2). The younger women are to learn from the older women how to "be self-controlled" (2:5). Every follower of Christ must learn self-control.

Self-control means learning to say "no" to selfish desires and passions. The picture of self-control is the boat which is steady at sea in the midst of raucous waves. God's grace trains us to "renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age" (Titus 2:12).

Practicing self-denial serves us in learning self-control. There's no need to become monks, and asceticism won't help us (Colossians 2:18). Yet, our ability to say no to small things trains us to say no to bigger matters. Going without optional preferences helps us learn to starve our sinful flesh as well. Self-denial strengthens over time.

7. Receive created things as God's gifts

Learning to overcome addiction is a matter of learning to stop putting our hope, trust, and joy in created things. We must also consider the other side of the coin. That is, we must learn to receive created things as God's gifts.

A Christian approach to creation includes the truth that God doesn't make junk! Creation can't cause us to sin. Because God is good, creation is good (Genesis 1:31; 1 Timothy 4:4). Creation is not God, but it is from God. All things are from God and through God and to God (Romans 11:36).

Therefore, as the apostle Paul teaches, "everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer" (1 Timothy 4:4–5). We sanctify (or make holy) all things with Scripture and prayer. By God's grace, we can receive everything He has made with thanksgiving (Ecclesiastes 5:19). That means we don't need to swear off alcohol or food or medicine or anything else *forever*! We won't find freedom from merely abstaining forever, but from trusting in Christ and enjoying creation as a gift from God, which means doing all things in moderation and in appropriate ways (1 Corinthians 9:27, 10:23–33; Philippians 4:5–9).

Admittedly, for a time, we may, as we've said above, put distance between us and that which threatens our faith with false worship of created things.

In fact, depending upon your specific situation, you may even find it wise to abstain for the rest of this life. Holiness is worth every effort!

Yet, remember, dear friend, this life is not *forever*. This life is but a season in view of eternity. There is a glorious Day coming when Christ will return or call us home. We will then drink and dine with Him, regardless of the nature of our present struggles (Isaiah 25:6; Luke 22:18; Romans 8:18). That Day is coming soon and very soon (Revelation 22:20).

The more we reflect upon Christ and that Day, the better we will be able to live in this day until then.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Do you know God in Christ by faith? In other words, are you a Christian? How do you know?
2. How does your Christian faith change the struggle against addiction?
3. Which of the seven scriptural strategies above was most challenging to you? Which was most encouraging? How might you practically implement one of the above this week?

Conclusion

You may have believed the lie that you cannot change in this life, that you'll be an addict or an alcoholic forever. I write these things to give you hope again. For with hope in God's Word, you'll be able to change. One of the things Paul wrote about drunkenness—that prototype of all addictions—was that “drunkards” will not “inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 6:10).

But look at all he said in context, “Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. *And such were some of you.* But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:9–11).

If the Lord Jesus Christ can justify and sanctify the Corinthians by the Spirit of our God, then he can change you too, dear friend. According to God's powerful Word, *your* testimony can be “and such were some of you” too one day. You don't have to be an “addict” or an “alcoholic” forever. By God's grace, you can trust and hope in Christ alone, not in created things.