

The Tragedy of Addiction

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Date: 10 October 2010

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[0 : 00] How about I pray? Father God, we thank you for your word in the scriptures.

We thank you for your great love revealed to us in Jesus. We pray today that as we look at this question of addiction, you might guide us from your word.

And Father, we pray these things for the glory of your son. Amen. Friends, most of us, I guess, would know the story of the Sorcerer's Apprentice, if only from our childhood, perhaps, seeing the Disney film Fantasia, or perhaps from the music of Paul Dukas.

But both film and music were inspired by a poem by a German poet called Goethe. And the story is quite simple, really. There's a young boy.

He's an apprentice to a sorcerer. He's desperate to learn magic. However, all that he's able to do is, all that he's allowed to do is the daily chores.

[1 : 11] One day, the sorcerer leaves the castle and gives orders for this boy to carry water from the well and to use it to scrub the floor. Well, anyway, the apprentice figures that what he might do is try a magic spell that will bring the broom into life.

And the broom will then just magically do all the job for him. And he tries it. And sure enough, it works. And I can still imagine in my mind, Mickey Mouse, you might remember him there.

He goes to sleep at this point. And anyway, he shows the broom, just before he does that, shows the broom how to carry a bucket, how to pick up a bucket, carry water to the tub so that it can be used to wash the floor.

And then he sleeps. And then the tub begins to fill with water. And it begins to overflow. And so at this point, the boy panics and tries to use magic to stop the broom.

And but it just keeps on bringing water. And then he gets really desperate and he chops up the broom. Having assumed he solved the problem, it's at this point that he naps again.

[2 : 16] And the small pieces of the broom then form into brooms themselves. Before long, there is an army of brooms. And there they are carrying water after water.

And it's just filling up this tub and water's going everywhere. The boy becomes panic stricken. He hears his master return. And the palm has him crying these words. Lord and master, hear my call. Ah, here comes the master. I have need of thee. From the spirits that I called, sir, deliver me. In my own mind, the story of the sorcerer's apprentice, I think, is a great snapshot of addiction.

You see, imagine someone calling on some external agent of some sort to give them help. Before long, however, the external agent assumes a life of its own.

And it becomes something that overpowers us, takes us, overdominates us or even enslaves us.

My own view is that one of the greatest problems facing modern Christians is the problem of addiction.

[3 : 15] Now, as a Christian, I have at times in my own Christian life found myself in the grip of one or more addictions. And I'm sure you have.

And I've watched those addictions sap my relationship with God. And as I've observed other Christians, as I've pastored other Christians, counseled other Christians, talked to other Christians, I've found that I am not alone in this.

You see, addiction is a massive problem for us as Christians. And in the modern world where everything is so accessible and where we are really quite financially well off, we can become addicted to so many things.

The problem is, though, that I don't think I've ever heard, apart from myself, a sermon on addiction directly. And because addiction is a problem for me and because I'm sure addiction is a problem for you, I want to see if God has anything to teach us on this particular problem.

Before we start, though, I need to tell you something. That is, I need to tell you that our English Bibles don't actually have a word for the word addict or addiction in the English Bibles.

[4 : 23] They have heaps to say about the topic, I think, though they don't use the term. And my approach today is going to have three stages to it. What I'm going to do is I'm going to look at the nature of addiction.

Then I'm going to see if we can get some theological perspectives on it. And third, I'm going to try and give you some practical tips on avoiding or escaping addiction. Now, before I start, I need to tell you that the way I'm approaching things today is not what we usually do.

Normally, we start with one passage and we just work our way through it. I'm not going to do that today. We're going to take a slightly different approach. We're going to look at the Bible, but look at about three or four different passages that sort of drag key ideas out for us into the public domain for us to see and have a look at and to see how they address this topic.

So first, let's define what addiction is. And I want to do it by telling you a story. The example that I'm going to give you of addiction is not an unusual one, but it is a rather extreme case.

It's a real one. It's a real story. It involves a real man. The addiction that he suffers from is normally one that involves women. But let me tell you, Gary grew up in a family that prized sporting ability.

[5 : 37] And the family sports were twofold, wrestling and football. Success in those sports are what gave Gary value. And the problem was, though, that in order to succeed at one, what do you need to do?

Build bulk. And in order to succeed in the other, you need to fit into a right weight range. So Gary started this endless round of dieting and overeating at school.

Then he went off to university. He left his girlfriend behind and he found out that she was going out with other guys. And he became emotionally lost, began to feel incredibly lonely.

And in his brain, he began to think that she would return to him if he lost weight. And so he started to run every day and to lift weights. And he cut his food intake in half. But then he'd get so hungry that he'd go out at night and he'd binge on junk food.

Anyway, binging brought him great comfort. It also worked against the very goal that he was trying to achieve. And so Gary worked out how he could have both.

[6 : 42] He would eat and then he would force himself to throw up afterwards. And before long, he was addicted. Life became one long story of exercise, eating, throwing up.

In fact, before long, this was all of life for Gary. And life went on this way, it's hard to imagine, for 16 years. He would often find himself lying on the shower floor, crying his eyes out, crying for, calling out for anyone to help him.

And Gary's story shows us the characteristics of addiction and it helps us come up with a ballpark definition. Now, this is an extreme case, but can you see what addiction is? It's a complex and sort of progressive attachment to a substance or a behaviour in which someone compulsively seeks to change life or change their mood.

The substance or the behaviour to which that person is addicted could be anything, really. It could be good or bad. It could be harmful or harmless.

It could be legal or illegal. It could be healthy or unhealthy. For example, the substance to which a person might be addicted might be illegal drugs. It might be alcohol. Or it might be just plain, ordinary food like Gary.

[8 : 01] Or the behaviour to which a person might be addicted might be viewing pornography. It might be work. Or, friends, it might be just plain old shopping. Most addictions start with some form of distress which a person seeks to escape.

The distress might be, you know, relational or work-related or financial or any manner of the stresses that come to us in our life. It may be that the distress disappears.

But what happens is the addiction continues on. It remains and it grows on its own. And finally, the person is hooked on it. They find themselves in the grip of something that they find deeply attractive.

And yet, at the same time, they begin to find themselves enslaved to it and they want to escape from it and get release and escape. The signs of addiction are very common. They include increasing tolerance, increasing desire for more, embarrassment, secretive behaviour, rationalising, delaying tactics, withdrawal symptoms and self-deception.

And so we might do incredibly stupid things like calling an addiction to consumerism something plainly ridiculous such as retail therapy. It is not.

[9 : 17] It is an addiction. So there is addiction in a nutshell. Now what I would like to do now is talk about addiction from God's perspective. And I want to do some theological reflection on the basis of the Bible.

And what does the Bible tell us fundamentally about God? Well, one of the very first things that it tells us, in fact, the first thing, as it were, is that God is a creator. Genesis 1 tells us he created the world and he created us as human beings and he made, and Psalm 104 tells us and many other parts of Scripture that this God is a good God who creates a good world and that world is a place which he wants us to live in and to enjoy.

He places within that world all that we need. He fills the earth with good things. As Psalm 145 says, as we looked at earlier on this year, he is a good and great king full of abundant goodness who opens his hand and fills the world with good things.

He's a good God who created a good world full of good things to enjoy. But the Bible tells us more than this. You see, in numerous places, the Bible tells us that God has fashioned us for him and he's placed within us a deep longing for him.

The first three pages of the Bible and the last two tell us that we were made to be related to God and everywhere in between it builds on this. It makes clear that we find our ultimate peace and joy and happiness when we are in an untainted relationship with God.

[10 : 46] Have a look in your Bibles with me at that Psalm we looked at, Psalm 42. So if you turn to the middle of your Bibles there, Psalm 42. And I'm just going to read this man's caught in a difficulty in terms of his relationship with God.

But look at what he says. As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

When shall I come and behold the face of God? My tears have been my food day and night. While people say to me continually, where is your God? He feels parted from God and yet what he wants in life is to be with God.

Deep inside, this is the desire I think of all humans, to be with their Creator, to be related to God.

And the ultimate disaster, ultimate tragedy, is when circumstances or difficulties such as in this Psalm, or any matter of things drag us away from that which God created us for.

God made us for Him. And fullness of life is found in Him. Now I want you in your Bibles to turn now to the New Testament, to Acts chapter 17. Now you might remember that in Acts chapter 17, Paul is addressing some non-Jews, some Greeks.

[12 : 09] And what he says to them indicates that Paul thinks that this yearning for God is common in all of humanity. Have a look at Acts chapter 17, verse 24.

And I'll just read a few verses from there. So Paul says this. Friends, can you see what is being said here?

What were we made for? We were made for God and we yearned for Him. And that is where fulfillment and joy is found. But when we look at ourselves and the rest of humanity, what do we find?

Well, the sad truth is we spend our life trying to dodge that which we were created for. We go about life trying to avoid God or replace God in our affections.

We work hard on turning a good creation to bad purposes. So we turn good sex into tainted sex.

We turn wine, which God gave us to make our heart rejoice, to something that helps us avoid facing life or stirs us up to do things that we'd never do when we were sober.

[13 : 50] Atomic energy becomes something we use to wipe out whole cities instead of to create energy. On top of this, we work hard on top of this. On top of this, we work hard at substituting our longing for God with substitute and counterfeit longings.

No longer does our soul yearn after the living God. Instead, what does it yearn for? More possessions. A husband.

A wife. Another drink. Another shopping session. Another television show. Another bout of exercise. A different sexual experience.

More time on the computer. Just another level of that computer game. Just one more session of gambling. Can you hear what I'm saying, friends? I'm saying deep underneath addiction lies the most powerful, mysterious and vital force of human existence.

Under every form of addiction, there is what? A deep sense of longing. An overriding sense for something else. It is a longing that fundamentally doesn't come from the brain or the belly or the genitals.

[14:59] It is a longing that comes from the heart. Underneath every human being, in the core of every human being, is a longing for wholeness, for fulfillment, for the ultimate God who is God himself.

But we've replaced all of that with counterfeits, haven't we? With empty substitutes. Instead of longing for God, we long for transcendence or the buzz of a transitory experience. Instead of finding joy in him, we find it in pleasure.

Instead of searching for him in the midst of pain, we become satisfied with just merely escape from pain. You see, the psalmist in Psalm 42, he'd love to escape from pain, but what he could not handle was being bereft of God.

You see, that is what we long for. And I guess the big question for us then is why? Why is there such a huge gap between what God made us for and what we are?

We see the Bible answers that question for us and it tells us that the answer is sin. It is our desire to live our own lives in independence. And you can see it in Genesis 3. We see it in Romans 1 as well.

[16:08] Turn with me. So if you're an axe, just turn a few pages forward to Romans chapter 1. And I want you to look at verses 18 following. So Romans 1, 18 following.

Look at what Paul says. He says, The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is pain to them because God has shown it to them.

In other words, this God whom we yearn after is known. Ever since the creation of the world, his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.

So they are without excuse. But though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him. But they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

[17:07] Can you see what Paul is saying? He's saying, God made us, has made himself known in creation. He's made us for him. But we have suppressed that truth in unrighteousness. Because of sin, we sort of try and push that truth underground.

Verses 21 to 23 gives us an example of how we do it. We exchange the glory of the immortal God for images. We exchange the truth of God for lies.

And the end result, look at it in verses 24 following, is that God gives us up to that. He allows us. He gives us over to our desires. The end result is that we then even distort the great and good gift of sex, which he goes on to talk about.

Instead of being God seekers, he calls us God. He says we become God haters. Instead of honoring the people who gave us birth, we become disobedient to parents. We become filled, Paul says, with every kind of wickedness, greed and depravity.

Can you see what's happened here? You see, our sinful nature has taken this godly, wonderful yearning for fullness with him. And we've turned it to yearn after created things and to find a counterfeit satisfaction in things that can never give enduring satisfaction.

[18:20] Friends, this is our world. This is our situation. And it's into this situation that God sent his only son, Jesus Christ. And in yet another display of great goodness, he acts in Jesus to enable us to be forgiven.

He proves himself again to be a good God who wants only good things for his created people.

Friends, I wonder if you can grasp the deep tragedy here.

Here is a God who is truly good. Here is a God who is truly God. He has placed this deep desire within us to be with him, to love him, to be loved by him.

Through Jesus, he's enabled that desire to be fulfilled. And yet we live our lives for this sort of pale shadow, an empty vapor.

We take good things that he's created for us to enjoy and we turn them into ways of escaping him or expressing our rebellion. And the worst tragedy of all is when we Christians, who should know better, do it.

[19 : 26] Let me ask you what it is that you find yourself addicted to. Oh, I don't mean the trifling things necessarily. I mean the things that take us away from God. Let me give you a hint as to how you might identify an addiction.

An addiction is a thing that you plan your day, your week around. It's a thing that governs your life, that takes your heart. It's the thing that captivates you more than God.

It's that thing that shifts aside and so often replaces your time in personal prayer and Bible study and relating to God or your family. An addiction can be chemical, social, relational, any manner of things.

What is it that you find yourself addicted to? So now we've identified the nature of addiction. We've done some theological reflection.

Now let me just give you some hints as to how we can escape this thing. And the very first thing you need to do is to recognize the problem. One way to do that is to ask all the questions that I've asked.

[20 : 29] That is, what is the thing that governs your life? What captivates you more than God? What's the substance or behavior that shifts aside the important things in life? Where does your mind drift to and you're being yearned for when you are idle?

For deeper addictions, you might add a series of extra questions. And friends, there are some very deep addictions. And they might be these ones. What is it that will embarrass you when the secrets of all people's hearts and lives will be revealed on the last day?

What is it that you try to give up on a daily basis, on an ongoing basis? What is it that leads you to isolation? What is it that causes you to not do as well in life and relationships as you might?

Friends, these are the stuff of addiction. And the very first step is to recognize them. And the second is to recognize their cause. The cause, friends, is me.

Or should I say you? Should I say us? It is our desire to find escape and relief in someone or something other than God.

[21 : 39] So I urge you to flee to God and to His grace. I urge you to do three things, three ways of doing this. A wake up to your greatest longing is the first. Now, friends, you might have to dig very deep to find this.

But your deepest longing is for God. It is for the acceptance He gives, for the love He gives, for the satisfaction He gives. God made you for Him.

And you will not find rest until you find it in Him. Second, I urge you to accept and live in forgiveness. You see, God sent Jesus into the world because He knows our sinful disposition.

And in Jesus, He's provided forgiveness. And He is willing to forgive you for these things. And you can go to Him again and again. And He will continue to forgive.

For He's a God who loves you. And He longs for you to be in untainted relationship with Him. Third, I want you to call upon God for help.

[22 : 41] You see, God is a God of grace. He longs for your freedom from these things. He longs that you find perfect freedom in the service of Him. So call upon Him for help.

He longs for your dependence and your trust. He longs to help. That's His nature. He loves helping the helpless. The next thing to do is to be honest about yourself and your weakness.

There is nothing more painful for us as humans than to be honest about our own weakness, is there? It is very, very hard to do.

And yet, the testimony of nearly everyone that I've read about in preparing this sermon, who has a problem with addiction, is that the very first step was to recognize their own weakness and their need of help.

My next bit of advice is to make choices. You see, whenever I read the Bible about Christian life, it makes clear to me that life is about choices. The Christian life is about choices.

[23 : 40] And Paul makes that clear when he talks about putting off and putting on certain things. Open your Bibles and have a look at it. Have a look at Ephesians chapter 4. And you can find similar sorts of thoughts in Colossians chapter 3.

But let's look at Ephesians 4 from verse 17. Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord, that you no longer live as the Gentiles live in the futility of their minds.

They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance and hardness of heart. They have lost all sensitivity, have abandoned themselves to a licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

This is not the way that you learned Christ. For surely you've heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus. You were taught to put away your former way of life. See that decision? It is about putting away a former way of life. Your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds. And to, can you see the language here?

[24 : 43] Clothe yourself with the new self, created according to the likeness of God, in true righteousness and holiness. So, then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth with our neighbours.

For we are members one of another. Be angry, but do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger. Don't make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing. Can you see all of this? It's all about decision making. It's all about saying no to that way of life, and yes to this way of life.

It is about decision making. It's about choosing to think or not think, to do or not do certain things. So, let me urge you, if you're caught in addiction, to make choices.

And the very first choice, let me suggest you make, is to can the excuses. Throw them out. You know the ones I mean? The one that says, oh, I need to drink so that I can relax or unwind.

Or the one that says, I've had a stressful day and therefore I need to engage in this activity or that activity. Or the one that says, oh, I can only be acceptable to God if I look like this or act like this or, you know.

[25 : 47] And the next choice is to cut the ties. So, if the first one is to can the excuses, the second one is to cut the ties. In other words, make a strong, deliberate choice that will cut the ties with the activity or the attitude that is dragging you away from God.

This is a trifling example, but I'll give it anyway. I have a good friend. He lives in another part of Australia. And we were shopping one day with him and his family.

And we needed to buy something in the newsagent. And as we were going into the newsagent, he stood outside. I said, why? He said, because there are too many things in there that all I will do is use them to feather my nest.

He was an academic and he knew that he just gathered things up that he did not need. And so he just distanced him from that. Now, the forms of addiction I'm talking about often need far more than that.

But they do need the same activity. That is the same. No, I'm not going to expose myself to that.

Jesus talks about this, doesn't he? When he talks about plucking out the eye that causes you to sin or cutting off the hand that causes you to sin.

[26 : 58] He's saying take drastic action with things that cause you to sin. It's a metaphor, but he's making things plainly clear. He's telling us that there comes a time in your life where you need to be rigorous with the things that separate you from God.

So it may very well be that you choose to take that element out of your house and to never let it come back. It may choose that you choose to never go into those shops again.

It may mean that you choose to never have an internet connection again. Friends, Jesus talks about this. He talks about these things.

He says cut them off. Separate yourself. These things that separate you from God and cause you to be living in a way that endangers your relationship with him deal rigorously with.

There comes a time when we need to determine that we'll shut these things completely out of our lives if they are going to overwhelm our lives. The next choice is to choose to flee to your heart's desire.

[28 : 05] That means fill the void that is created by cutting out those things with good things, with things of eternal value. Paul talks about this in Philippians 4. Do you remember what he says?

He says fill your minds with the things that are good and excellent. He goes through a whole list of them. He says fill your mind with those things. Those are the things that are about you and God and the good things in his world.

Seek God. Seek the things of God. Recognise that life and fulfilment are found in him and him alone. Choose the things that are of him and that lead to him and that strengthen your relationship with him.

I've got two more bits of advice to close off with. The first bit of advice comes from the fact that some addictions are very, very deeply seated. I first preached this sermon in Adelaide a number of years ago.

And about four years ago, I got a phone call. It was just out of the blue. And this guy said, Andrew, my name's whatever. He said, I want to tell you that I heard that sermon that you preached in our church in Adelaide a few years ago.

[29 : 13] And I have a very potent addiction that is just destroying my life. What should I do? Can you give me any help?

Can you send me to someone? He realised he actually needed psychological help. And I was able to point him to a Christian counsellor who had some expertise in this area.

Friends, some forms of sexual addiction, drug addiction, food addiction need professional help. You may need to seek medical or psychological help. Other forms of addiction, such as addiction to pornography or alcohol, may just need the help of a trusted Christian friend.

And Christian accountability is a great asset here. Make yourself accountable to someone.

Undertake that you'll regularly tell them how things are going. And you'll allow them to regularly ask you out of the blue.

I currently do this for a number of Christian friends. For clergy who have struggled with pornography. And who say to me, this is an issue for me. For young men who struggle with pornography.

[30 : 21] And say, this is an issue for me. And they've come to me and they've said, can you please check up on me regularly? Because the very fact that I have to tell you how I'm going will help me. And I do.

They know I will. So talk to a friend and make yourself accountable. My last bit of advice is, do it today. Don't allow yourself to be led astray into counterfeits.

Friends, you were made for God. You were bought with the price of the death of his son, Jesus. I urge you, find fulfillment in him.

You were made for it. And as you do this, let me tell you that you're not alone. You see, as I've prepared this talk, every time I've prepared this talk, I've identified my own addictions.

You know, the ones that drag me away from relationship with God or weaken my relationship with God. And I've chosen to do what I'm advising you to do today. I'm going to deal rigorously with an addiction in my own life.

[31 : 25] And I'll make myself a bit vulnerable here. You can check up on how I'm going. I know 200 people every Saturday morning are going to ask, no, don't do that.

But occasionally, ask me. Ask how it's going. Pray for me. And do it with each other as well. Hold me accountable.

Hold each other accountable. For I think you know what I know. I think you know that Jesus alone satisfies the deepest longings of our hearts. I want to close by reading the words of a great Irish hymn, which I wish I'd thought to put in the songs for today.

But you'll know it all. It's an old hymn. And it's a great one. And it goes like this. Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart. Nought be all else to me, save that thou art.

Thou my best thought by day or by night, waking or sleeping. Thy presence my light. Be thou my wisdom. Thou my true word. I ever with thee and thou with me, Lord.

[32 : 33] Thou my great father. I thy true son. Thou in me dwelling and I with thee one. Be thou my battle shield sword for the fight. Be thou my dignity. Thou my delight.

Thou my soul shelter. Thou my high tower. Raise thou me heavenward. O power of my power. Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise.

Thou mine inheritance now and always. Thou and thou only, first in my heart. High King of heaven, my treasure thou art. High King of heaven, my victory won.

May I reach heaven's joys. O bright heaven's sun. Heart of my own heart, whatever before. Still be my vision. O ruler of all. Let's pray.

And I'm just going to pray the first line, the first part of this hymn. And you might turn them into your own words in your own heart. Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart.

[33 : 40] Nor be all else to me, save that thou art. Thou my best thought, by day or by night. Waking or sleeping. Thy presence my light.

Father, thank you for the Lord Jesus, who's brought us into a relationship with you. May we crave nothing else, but to live in that relationship and enjoy it.

And enjoy you forever. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.